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THE TERRIBLE GAME

A DARING YOUNG SPY
PLAYS FOR HIS LIFE ON A
TOP-SECRET MISSION
OF SPLIT-SECOND THRILLS
BY DAN TYLER MOORE



THE TERRIBLE GAME

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THE TERRIBLE GAME

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The big mysterious looking Italian style house was located fifteen miles outside Washington up the Potomac River. It was perched on a cliff overlooking the slow waters of the old Chesapeake & Ohio Canal. Two hundred yards to the east were the stables, and spread around it on all sides were four hundred acres of beautifully tended rolling grasslands. A slender short wave radio transmission tower of the most modern design was perched on top of the old ivy-covered windmill.

A sharp clanging sound was coming from a walled courtyard on the north side of the house. The courtyard, about forty feet long and twenty feet wide, was surrounded by a fifteen foot red brick wall covered with ivy. Two armored figures were circling around inside the courtyard apparently trying to kill each other. Each wielded a long curved scimitar of curious shape and each was holding in his left hand, thrust out toward his opponent, a heavy knife about six inches long with a massive brass hand guard. The scimitars were so sharply recurved at their tips that the points were directed back toward the handles in sharp hooks. The blades appeared to be designed for slashing or hooking an opponent.

Each man wore a complete covering of black lacquered leather armor reinforced with strips of metal. Each also wore a steel helmet which extended down to cover the back of his neck. Their faces were protected by nose pieces which dropped almost to their chins.

The only difference between the armor-covered antagonists was that one was heavier and stronger and the other appeared to be more quick and agile. They circled warily around each other feinting with their swords for openings. Every few seconds there was a furious exchange of blows and parries.

Suddenly the lighter of the two figures aimed a vicious slash at his heavier opponent's left side. The larger man whipped his sword swiftly across the front of his body and easily parried it. Instantly his attacker twisted his wrist through a half circle. The hook at the end of his blade spun around and caught the hook of his opponent's weapon. The lighter man jerked back his sword arm viciously, dragging his opponent's blade with it. His heavy antagonist was spun halfway around. Before he could recover the thick blunt blade of his attacker's knife slammed into the lacquer covering in the middle of his back. The heavy man grunted, then he lowered his sword and laughed. His voice was deep and pleasant. "Good work, Jonathan, I'm dead. Hooked like a flounder."

Jonathan smiled delightedly. When his father gave a compliment it really meant something. "I was trying to figure out last night, Dad, why they put hooks on these swords at all. I was swinging mine around in my room thinking there must be some very tricky use for the hook to make up for the fact that it made the sword useless for thrusting." He held up the hooked blade and for the hundredth time wondered what the

design on the blade meant—a beautifully damascened horseman thrusting a lance through a hanging ring. Jonathan looked at his father. “With an ordinary saber you can’t pull at your opponent. You can only thrust at him or cut. The hook could be for jerking the other fellow off balance so you could stab him with your knife.” He rotated his wrist and the hook revolved in a vicious circle. “Look, Dad, no one is afraid of being *hooked* with a sword. A man with this type weapon could take an ordinary opponent terribly by surprise.” Jonathan looked slyly at his father. “The way I did you.”

Colonel Burr lifted off his helmet and laid it on the stone bench at the edge of the courtyard. His blue eyes crinkled at the corners and he grinned ruefully at his son. Every inch and ounce of his two-hundred-pound body looked ready for business. Jonathan felt sure he was the finest looking man in the world—looked like a Roman gladiator.

“You certainly proved your point, Jonathan.” The full lips turned up at the corners. “You don’t have to rub it in. Let’s practice it again tomorrow afternoon.” He wiped the perspiration off his forehead. “That almost evens the score. You’ve won three to my four. Let’s call it a day.”

Jonathan laid his sword down on the stone bench and lifted off his helmet—what a relief to get out of that iron trap—nice to feel the cool wind blowing through his hair. He was a younger and lighter version of his father with a thinner face but with the same intelligent blue eyes. His crew cut blond hair was a bit lighter but had the same bristly look as if it were charged with electricity. His face was a striking one. It gave one the impression of being unusually sensitive to all stimuli—pleasure, pain, anger and physical sensation. To a marked extent it seemed to approach the ancient Greek

ideal of close relationship between the physical and the intellectual. It was the face of a young man, still avidly interested in athletics, who was just beginning to appreciate the delights of using his sharp, high I.Q. brain.

He turned to his father and tried his best to look innocent—it was awfully hard to fool the old man. “I thought of another thing, Dad, too. If a small country which was surrounded by powerful neighbors trained their soldiers to use a strange weapon like this hooked sword, it would give them a tremendous military advantage—like having a secret weapon. Don’t you think so?”

His father’s gray eyes twinkled. “You wouldn’t be trying to pump me, would you, Jonathan?”

Jonathan grinned but he couldn’t help feeling a little flash of resentment. Who wouldn’t feel a bit let down? He certainly had in the past two days. Whenever he approached the subject of their strange training together—the reasons for it—his father always put him off with a laugh. His curiosity was beginning to eat him up—and why wouldn’t it? It had almost gotten to the point where he could think of nothing else.

Jonathan was tall and rangy for his nineteen years, almost as tall as his father, with the same graceful athletic way of handling himself and the beginnings of the same great physical strength. He had his father’s beaked nose and the same rangy, floating-power walk, but he was lighter by at least forty pounds. He had just finished his sophomore year at Yale where he was enjoying the fact that everyone considered him an athletic sensation.

Jonathan slowly unfastened the separate pieces of his lacquered armor: the greaves on his legs, the breast and back plates, the beautifully articulated steel gauntlets that allowed

each finger such perfect freedom and the pieces that protected his arms and shoulders.

He looked at the blade of his father's sword lying on the bench. On it was damascened a realistic figure of an archer on horseback shooting at a huge moose-like deer. What did it all add up to? What a queer two days they had had together, certainly the oddest anyone had ever had. It had been glorious fun, the most fun of his life, but why—what did it all mean? Why was his father so secretive about the strange things they were doing? After all, he wasn't a kid. He was nineteen years old. Jonathan laid the parts of his lacquered armor on the stone bench beside his father.

He had arrived home two days before full of the wonderful summer job he had lined up in the Louisiana oil fields. "Think of it, Dad, two hundred dollars a month for a temporary summer job. They're actually paying me for the privilege of getting into condition for football. I should pay them." His father had looked at him with a funny smile. "Jonathan, I've already lined up a job for you, only at three hundred dollars a month. You will not only get in condition for football, but for licking twice your weight in wildcats." He had looked at him appraisingly. "By fall you will be the closest thing to a wildcat the Harvard team ever played football against."

After his father told him what he had in mind Jonathan had been so puzzled and curious it had almost taken the delight out of it. What a dream of a way to spend two months—but *why* were they doing it? It sounded insane. His father had clapped him on the back. "All I can tell you, Jonathan, is that it is important and that you can't say anything about it to anyone." He hesitated. "It may look like a cops and robbers game, but it isn't. Here is our daily

schedule.” He handed him a printed list. “You get Saturday afternoons and Sundays off.”

Jonathan looked at the typed list in astonishment. Of all the queer ways to spend a summer!

Early the next morning he felt a hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes. It was his father. He had on only one garment, a pair of shiny coal-black leather pants fastened around his waist by heavy rawhide thongs. Jonathan rubbed his eyes and blinked, then he sniffed. There was a strong smell of olive oil—seemed to come from his father’s pants. They stretched to below his knees, where they were fastened by rawhide thongs. He saw that his feet were bare and that he had another pair of identical pants hanging over his arm. There was a broad smile on his face.

“*Merhaba, nasil siniz,*” he said.

Jonathan grinned. Where had his father learned to say hello in Turkish? He would show him. He answered in the same language. “*Iiyim siz nasil siniz.*” Then he shifted to English. “Is it time to get up already?”

“Part of our deal,” his father said handing him the pants, “is that we speak Turkish—not a word of English until five o’clock in the afternoon. After a week we speak nothing but Turkish at any time, unless we have guests, or unless there’s an emergency.” He adjusted the thong around his waist. “I’m going to be easy on you for two days, Jonathan. After that, if you speak even one word of English before five o’clock you lose that whole day’s pay.” He turned to go. “Maybe you wondered why I had you take Turkish lessons at Yale. Your professor wrote me that you learned fast—said you could already speak pretty good conversational Turkish.”

Jonathan had loved Turkish, even though he hadn’t under-

stood why his father wanted him to take it. As his tongue slipped easily back into the soft S's that were so characteristic of the language he was glad he had studied so hard, hard enough to get an A for the year's work.

Jonathan took the leather pants and pulled them on and sniffed—olive oil. He had a little trouble fastening the thongs around his waist and below the knees as his father had. "Why the queer pants?" he asked in Turkish. "And why do they smell like a tossed chef's salad?"

"They are for Asiatic wrestling." His father pointed to the list. "We're going to do it every morning from ten to ten thirty. You'll find out soon enough why they smell that way."

Jonathan felt a bit ridiculous following his father into the dining room dressed the way they were. He could smell liver and bacon cooking. The pantry door opened. It was Ferguson with the orange juice. Jonathan grinned at him, expecting some reaction to their costumes. He was disappointed. If the butler thought their costumes were queer he did not betray it by the slightest change of expression. As he left the room Jonathan's father winked. "When you've been with the Burr family thirty years," he said, "it takes more than a couple of men eating breakfast in nothing but black leather pants to astonish you."

It was surprising how easily his father spoke Turkish. They talked all through the oatmeal and thick cream and through the liver and eggs and bacon. Mostly they talked about wrestling.

Colonel Burr took a big swallow of milk. "Asiatic wrestling is different from the stuff you are used to at college," he said. "An intercollegiate wrestler wouldn't last one minute against any ham Turkish wrestler—if he fought under their ancient rules."

He cut off a large piece of liver and suspended it at the end of his fork. "There are just two ways to win an Asiatic wrestling match," he said. "One, use any method you want to get your opponent's chest pointing up toward the sky, even for a fraction of a second. If he falls on his back he loses. If you can lift him up in the air so his chest faces the sky, you win." His father grunted. "The other way you can win is much rarer. If you pull your opponent's pants off he loses." Jonathan watched his father down another slab of liver and a great gulp of milk—easy to see where his own appetite came from. "That's why, Jonathan, the pants are leather and that's why they are tied on with three sets of rawhide thongs."

They went into the living room and sat down. "What's next on the list?"

Jonathan had already memorized it. "An hour of Turkish conversation," he said. He was delighted at the swiftness with which they were speaking at the end of an hour. Once he got his gears really shifted to Turkish, things went almost as smoothly as if they were speaking English.

Just as he was beginning to get tired of just sitting and talking his father got up and led the way to the walled garden where they used to play croquet before his mother died. On the stone bench was a brass kettle with a long curved spout. His father picked it up and poured an oily yellow liquid over his body. Jonathan sniffed—olive oil. His father put down the kettle and spread it over himself with his hands.

"To make the body slippery and hard to grasp. Cover yourself thoroughly or you won't stand a chance. It's an old Turkish wrestling trick."

They crouched, facing each other in the center of the plot

of grass. Their arms were outstretched, hands open. Despite his father's size, Jonathan was confident. He knew he was strong for his age and very quick. It had been no trouble at all making the Yale wrestling team and then winning the intercollegiates. The coach said he was a shoo-in for the Olympics next year. He grinned at his father and decided to try a hip throw. He lowered his arms. As he expected, his father ducked his head. Jonathan threw his right arm around his father's neck and locked his hands together. He tried to pull his father over his hip. Instantly he knew he had lost—had forgotten the olive oil. His locked arms slipped over his father's head with a plop. He scrambled off balance and fell to his knees, his back toward his father. Instantly he felt himself grasped powerfully from behind and lifted into the air face up. The sun blinded him and he heard his father chuckle. "Chest toward the sky. You lose, Jonathan."

Jonathan was thankful when ten thirty came. There was a taste of blood and olive oil in his mouth and the whole universe smelled of olive oil. He felt completely exhausted. It was good to see that even his father was breathing heavily. Big patches were torn out of the carefully manicured lawn and it was shiny with olive oil. It gave him great satisfaction to see the oil on his father's body streaked with perspiration and green grass stains with little spears of grass and leaves ground into his leather pants. Jonathan knew he had made a good showing against a much stronger and heavier opponent. After all, his father had been famous for years as an athlete. He felt a hand come down on his shoulder.

"You're a wonderful sparring partner, Jonathan. After a couple of weeks of practice and a little firming up with the heavy weights you'll give me, and most other people, a whale of a lot of trouble."

“Trouble at what?” Jonathan asked, but his father had turned to go into the house.

It took five minutes of hard scrubbing under the shower to get the olive oil off his body and out of his hair. He never did get it out of his nose. They got dressed in their riding clothes and walked out to the barn. Jonathan’s watch showed exactly ten forty-five as they each mounted one of the furry little ponies that the grooms were holding. Jonathan wondered why each pony had two men holding its bridle, with another standing on the opposite side as he mounted. The grooms were armed with heavy leather quirts. Jonathan noticed that they looked nervous. They seemed relieved once he was safely mounted. What the heck, he had ridden since he was five years old. They acted as if he were mounting a tiger.

The queer peaked saddle felt uncomfortable—like sitting on a merry-go-round horse. It came up to a point both in front and behind—hemmed one in. Jonathan looked over at his father—where had he seen that picture before? Then he remembered—an illustration in his book on the adventures of Marco Polo. He ran his fingers through the thick woolly fur on his pony’s neck. They were Mongol steppes ponies all right—even the saddles were from Mongolia. The heavy brass stirrups were closed in the front like brass boot toes, just like the ones in the museum.

He studied the ponies—about four feet high, obviously very strong and hardy despite their small size. Jonathan was struck by their large ungainly heads and by their small wicked eyes and evil expressions. Their manes were short and bristled up like hair brushes. Jonathan was particularly intrigued by their tiny ears and by their mule-like tails—short hair over most of the tail and a lion’s tuft at the end. They were a

freakish dun color with darker backs and legs and almost white bellies.

Jonathan shouted to his father. "Where did these animals come from?" He saw that in spite of the extreme leverage of his snaffle bit, his father was having trouble controlling his pony. "I bought them from a zoo down south. This one's name is Tamerlane, yours is Genghis Khan. They are good examples of what the scientists call 'Prejvalsky's horse.' It's the only wild horse still in existence."

"How about the wild horses in our prairie states, Dad, the ones in Montana and Wyoming?"

"Those are just the descendants of domestic horses that escaped into the wilds." His father stroked the furry neck of his mount. "Prejvalsky's horse is no more domesticated than the tiger in the zoo, so watch out for them. Never turn your back on them even for an instant. If they get a chance they'll try to bite your head off, or even worse, kick you into the middle of next week."

His father's horse shied violently and Jonathan could see the strength his father exerted to bring him under control.

"I had the devil's own time breaking these horses for riding. Afraid I haven't done a very good job on this one. A little like trying to break a Bengal tiger. For a while it looked as if they were going to break me first—almost expected to end up with a saddle and bridle on."

Jonathan could literally feel the wild nervous energy of his pony. It seemed to be transmitted like a current along the reins to his hands. He found it impossible to post to the swift jogging trot. "Are these ponies faster than regular horses?"

His father shook his head. "They certainly are, running by themselves, but they haven't been developed to carry a rider.

Our thoroughbreds can beat them on a race track, but these would still be going a week later. No horse on earth could beat one of these in a race from Washington to Cleveland."

"Why did you get them, Father? They must have been expensive. I don't see what use they are, except as curiosities."

His father looked at him with a faint smile. "I bought them to make big overgrown rascals who are being paid three hundred dollars a month to do a job and not ask questions—ask questions."

Jonathan felt his face grow warm. "Anyone who didn't ask questions about a situation like this, Dad, would have to be just plain crazy."

His father chuckled. "I hope sometime I can tell you exactly what this is all about—how much, Jonathan, you are helping with something really important."

Jonathan looked down at his saddle—his curiosity was eating him up, consuming him. He'd been able to think of nothing else for two days. He knew now he *must* find out why they were doing this. He looked up at his father. "I know one thing," he said, "with our Asiatic wrestling and lacquered leather armor and steppes ponies, it's got to do with the Mongols. The Mongols are now inside Russia, so it's got to do with the U.S.S.R.!" Jonathan searched his father's expression. He thought he saw an appreciative gleam in the humorous blue eyes but couldn't be sure.

"You guess all you want, Jonathan, but don't let your guesses go beyond the two of us. It's important we don't have anybody else guessing what we are doing." He paused. "I can tell you this, though. It is something really important to the peace of the world." His change of expression dismissed the subject.

“Make a note on your calendar, Jonathan, two weeks from tonight we’re expected for a black tie dinner at the Russian Embassy. Their ambassador is rolling out the red carpet for Russia’s number one parachute general who is coming to the U.S. on a visit. Official Washington will be there en masse to try to demonstrate our desire for friendly relationships and world peace.

“General Belek is not only their top expert on parachute warfare, he is also their greatest athlete—you remember he won the decathlon and several other events in the last Olympics.”

Jonathan was delighted—everyone had heard of General Belek, the most versatile athlete the Olympics had produced since Jim Thorpe.

They rode over the hill at the far end of the pasture and Jonathan saw a big wooden T made of four by fours. It was about twelve feet high and looked like a gallows. From each end of the horizontal piece hung a cord with a ring knotted to its end. The ring hung down to about the height of his shoulder as he sat on his horse. Two thin lances about thirteen feet long were leaning against the crossbar with their butt ends on the grass. Jonathan’s father picked one up without dismounting and hefted it until he found its center of gravity, a bit front of center. Jonathan noticed that the foot-long steel point was flush with the hickory shaft with no barb or projection of any kind.

“We’re going to spend about twenty minutes learning how to spear these hanging rings as we ride by.” Jonathan picked up the other lance and hefted it the way his father had.

“It’s a lot harder than it looks,” his father said, “because of the up and down motion of the horse. To spear the ring

you've got to eliminate that by standing up in your stirrups and flexing your knees to keep your body level while the horse rises and falls under you. You'll have to try it first at a walk."

Jonathan measured the rings with his eye—they weren't more than an inch and a half in diameter, just barely big enough for the lance to go through—looked impossible.

"You stay here, Jonathan. This is how you'll be doing it in a few days." His father spurred back about fifty yards. He whirled and galloped toward him at full speed. He was standing in his stirrups holding the lance at shoulder level, balancing the shaft lightly in the tips of his fingers. Despite the up and down motion of the galloping pony, the point of the lance was flying through the air on a flat level line. His father thrust the lance neatly through the ring and let it clatter to the ground. Suddenly Jonathan remembered where he had seen that before—the damascened picture on the blade of his sword.

Jonathan galloped back fifty yards, trying to stand in the stirrups and steady himself the way his father did. It was much harder than it looked. His lance felt unwieldy and seemed to have a mind of its own, particularly about direction. When he reined up and turned, the lance resisted the turn and slapped his pony's head just below the sensitive twitching right ear. In an instant Jonathan felt himself astride a living volcano, snorting, bucking in all directions, twisting, trying to throw him off, and finally turning around and trying to bite his leg with long yellow teeth. Jonathan heard his father's shout, "Throw away your spear, Jonathan, until he calms down."

He flung it to one side, and the clatter set off another

paroxysm of twisting and bucking. Again the pony reached around with bared teeth and tried to bite him. Jonathan kicked him in the face with the heavy bronze stirrup and set off still another volcanic series of bucks and twistings. Jonathan knew he had never been much more scared. This was no ordinary horse. If he got bucked off he could be sure of one thing, the horse would finish him off then and there as he lay on the ground. One of the old Anatolian proverbs his Turkish teacher was always quoting flashed into his mind. "He who rides a tiger dare not dismount."

Jonathan clamped his knees as tightly as he could and unashamedly clung to the peak of the saddle with both hands. For a full minute the tempest went on. Suddenly the fire died out of the wicked little eyes and the pony stood stock still. Jonathan could feel only a slight trembling to remind him that the vicious temper was still there. Flecks of foam covered him and as pony stood there trembling the heat of his body lifted the rich smell of his lather to Jonathan's nostrils.

Jonathan was dismounting to pick up his lance when he heard his father's warning shout. "Stop. Don't dismount. That's no horse. He weighs a lot more than you. When you're on the ground he can kill you in nothing flat."

His father spurred over to his side. With a graceful movement he grasped the pommel of his saddle with his left hand, leaned impossibly down near his pony's hoofs and snatched the spear off the ground. He handed it to Jonathan.

It was difficult trying to eliminate the up and down motion. Jonathan felt clumsy and oafish standing up in the stirrups walking his mount jerkily toward the hanging ring. Slowly as they were moving, a little side movement at the

last instant caused him to miss by two or three inches. He heard his father's joyous laugh. "Try it again, Jonathan."

An hour later, with his horse always at a walk, he was consistently pushing his lance through the ring. "Tomorrow," said his father, "we will add a little speed, and the next day a little more, until you can do it at a dead gallop."

2 ♦ ♦ ♦

As they cantered back to the barn Jonathan knew curiosity would kill him if he didn't find out what his father was up to. The smell of fresh hay tingled in his nostrils, and the smell of manure—nice to be back on the farm, but what a frustrated feeling. No theory seemed to fit the peculiar facts. Once during the morning he thought perhaps his father might be preparing himself for a Hollywood movie production—but why would that be secret? Then he thought perhaps he might be writing a book about medieval weapons, particularly Asiatic weapons, but what was secret about that—and why the wrestling and the Turkish conversation?

Jonathan had never seen his father more intensely concentrated on anything. He no longer worked in his study. He had stopped his polo and hunting and entertaining. He had even given up tennis. His father appeared to be making a profession out of their curious routine, a routine that would have killed most men half his age.

The first two days Jonathan thought it was even going to kill him. He looked now at his father's erect athletic figure riding ahead of him and smiled. What a mysterious person to have for a father. No one really seemed to know what he

did, but everyone was curious. People always assumed it was something important and secret. It was nice to have so much excitement always going on. He knew he would never forget last night.

He had come home late from a dance at the Metropolitan Club in Washington. The house was lit up like a night club. Several big cars were parked in the driveway. Three or four burly men had been wandering suspiciously around the house, acting as though it belonged to them. They gave him long steady looks as he came in. He heard a low rumble of conversation in his father's study and poked his head around the door to see who it was. His father was sprawled in a leather armchair talking to someone with a bald head who was sitting with his back to Jonathan, his feet propped up on a small chair.

Colonel Burr had obviously been explaining something to his visitor. His voice had that same low-pitched methodical sound it always had when he was outlining a course of action—it made people lean forward and stop everything else. He saw Jonathan.

“Ah, here is my sparring partner now.” He introduced him to the visitor. Jonathan was flabbergasted. It was the president of the United States. Jonathan felt himself staring. He had seen the president before at the big White House receptions, but never alone and relaxed, with his feet on a chair, at three o'clock in the morning. Jonathan felt the charm of that famous smile.

“You’ve grown a whale of a lot in the past few years, Jonathan.”

Jonathan wanted desperately to stay. He was sure somehow they were talking about the mystery of their extraordinary training. Their silence told him, though, that he was

interrupting something important. He said good night and went reluctantly off to bed. He got undressed but couldn't get to sleep—couldn't get the scene downstairs out of his mind—the president of the United States.

He knew his father and the president had been close friends for many years, companions-at-arms when they had both been in the army. This was no social meeting though, or they would have asked him to stay.

As he lay wide-eyed in bed he wondered what could be so important that the president himself would be in on it. Jonathan had gotten the feeling that the president was personally passing on some plan proposed by his father—but what could be that important? The president had a Cabinet and hundreds of generals, admirals, commissioners, administrators and experts under him. He was famous for delegating authority and responsibility to capable subordinates. Jonathan's eyes stared into the darkness—perhaps that's what he was doing, delegating something of tremendous importance to his father.

Jonathan's bedroom was directly over his father's study and snatches of the conversation occasionally drifted up through the hot air register near his bed. When his father talked he could hear only the low rumble of his deep voice but no words he could distinguish. The president's voice, though, had more carrying power, and occasionally phrases and even whole sentences would come up to him.

One phrase was repeated so often that, although it was strange to him, Jonathan finally pinned it down. It was "Trans-Baikal Railway." He determined to look that up the next day, even if he had to drive all the way in to the Library of Congress.

A few minutes later he heard the phrase "atomic howitzer"

repeated several times. Jonathan had heard that the army had developed a new howitzer on a light trailer that could hurl atomic projectiles up to twenty miles.

All at once there was a noise of chairs being moved and men getting to their feet and then Jonathan heard something that electrified him. He lay there staring into the darkness, his mouth open. He had definitely heard the president's clear voice—"... could be the greatest spy operation in history!"

As he gentled his fierce little pony along the path, Jonathan thought back. All at once he realized that all of their present activities had started months before. Jonathan's mind raced back over the facts. Then his father had written him about the arrival of the wild horses and the almost impossible task he had breaking them to the bridle. And the Turkish. Why had his father started him on that over nine months ago?

It suddenly became clear to Jonathan that his father *was* in training for something—that his statement to the president was no joke—maybe he was his father's sparring partner for some horrible and dangerous mission. But how could the type of training they were doing be of interest to a president of the United States? How could anyone use a hooked sword or a wrestler covered with olive oil on a modern spy mission?

They returned to the barn and dismounted. While two grooms were gingerly leading Tamerlane away, Jonathan saw Genghis Khan glaring at him with his wicked little oriental eyes. Suddenly he curled his lip back from his long yellow teeth and lunged. Jonathan jumped back convulsively. He stumbled over a stone and fell heavily to the ground. The pony was on him in an instant. His father whirled and brought the heel of his hand up with tremendous force under the horse's nose. Genghis Khan reared and shied

back, and then lunged again. This time he got a much harder smash on the nose and a heavy follow-up against the side of his neck with his father's quirt. The horse reared again and whinnied, but suddenly the wicked look vanished. For a magic moment Jonathan thought he looked like an ordinary domestic horse—almost coy. Jonathan scrambled to his feet wondering what sort of a fool his father thought he was. His father turned to him but kept one eye on the pony.

“Perhaps that looks cruel, Jonathan, but if you leave the slightest doubt as to who is the boss you will get seriously hurt. It's just a matter of time. This horse is just like everything else in Central Asia—especially the men. The only thing Asia respects is superior force.” He smiled. “And you've not only got to keep showing them you have it, but that you are not afraid to use it.”

As they strolled back to the house Jonathan felt his father's hand on his shoulder. “I've been watching your face out there, son. You're pretty upset about not knowing what this is all about, aren't you?”

Jonathan looked at him and tried to force a smile. He knew it was a weak attempt. “It is hard, Dad, doing something as interesting as this without knowing the real reason.” He turned his head away. “It's a little like having someone tell you they know a terrific secret—but they can't tell you what it is.” He looked miserably at his father. “It might have been better if I had taken the job in Louisiana.”

His father's arm tightened a bit around his shoulder. “I don't believe a word of it,” he said, and Jonathan knew that *he* didn't either. He wouldn't be doing anything else for all the slant-eyed ponies in Mongolia. Anyway, he told himself, this just offered a greater challenge. He was going to find

out somehow what they were doing, ferret it out without any help from his father at all. After all, his father had almost challenged him to find out—spy warfare within spy warfare.

The next morning just before lunch they were sitting side by side on a stone bench. They were leaning back against the dark evergreen ivy that covered the side of the big house. Their legs were stretched out and they were getting in a little Turkish practice before Ferguson announced lunch. Suddenly his father drew back his legs and stared down at the brick footpath that curved in front of them. Jonathan's eyes followed his father's and he pulled up his own legs with a convulsive jerk. What the deuce. A dense column of red ants was marching across the path—looked like a military formation. Jonathan's eyes jumped to the head of the column—they were attacking a much smaller number of black ants that were massed in a circle around an opening—obviously their anthill.

Jonathan got down on his hands and knees. Even with his naked eye he could see that a deadly battle was taking place. Fighting clumps of ants were rolling about clinging to each other in deadly conflict and mutilated red and black bodies were strewn all over the tiny battlefield.

Jonathan sprinted into the house and got two magnifying glasses. Instantly the scene blew up into one of frightful carnage. They were both down on their knees now. The small line of black defenders were having a hard time. Jonathan was electrified by the ferocity of the combatants. The magnifying glass made the details hideously clear. The cruel horizontal pincers were lopping off legs and antennae and chopping the bodies of their opponents in half.

"Perhaps the red ants are raiding the black ones for slaves," said his father. "I've heard they break into the nests and take

the eggs back to their own hills and raise them as servants.” He laughed. “With good cooks so hard to get, it’s too bad we can’t do the same thing.”

Jonathan noticed something surprising—the red ants were all identical, but the blacks were divided into two types: the smaller were a little smaller than the reds, but those in the front line of battle were almost twice as large as their brothers behind the lines. Each snap of the huge jaws of these larger ants had a devastating effect. They were super ants, Jonathan thought, some of them taking on three or four red ants at once.

Behind the advance rank of large black ants the smaller black workers scurried around, finishing off wounded red opponents and moving in to worry and snap at the heels of red ants that were already involved with their large brothers.

The picture in Jonathan’s magnifying glass was so realistic that he found himself getting excited—like a god looking down on a war of men. He was on the side of the blacks—they were the underdogs, fewer in number and on the defense. It was all he could do to prevent himself from grabbing a blade of grass and interfering like a Homeric god in the individual combats. “Father,” he cried, “the blacks are driving them away. They are outnumbered but they are winning. They are braver because they are defending their homes.”

His father chuckled. “It’s also, Jonathan, because the blacks have a regular standing army and the reds haven’t.” He pointed with a long straw. “Those big black ants in the front rank are specialized soldiers, bred just for protecting the anthill. It is the same with human beings. A country with a regular professional standing army of experienced soldiers, like the Turkish Janizaries, usually wins out in the long run.”

After a few minutes Jonathan saw that the red ants were in full retreat. The big black soldiers were snapping at them from behind, picking off the stragglers. Jonathan chuckled. "I guess they won't try that again very soon." He got up and sat on the bench beside his father. He felt his father looking at him.

"That should be a good lesson to you, Jonathan. The big soldier ants have just one job. They protect the anthill. The other ants feed them, they wait on them, they do everything in their power to keep them healthy and alive. But they do it only for one reason—when an emergency comes along like the one we just saw, the soldier ants get out there in the front lines and risk their lives."

Jonathan saw his father looking at him, waiting for something, expecting him to get some idea which this illustrated. He looked into his father's eyes. Suddenly a host of memories came back to him, bits of conversations they had had together. He thought of his great-great-great-grandfather, Israel Putnam, who had commanded the tattered Colonial forces at the Battle of Bunker Hill, the one who warned his men not to shoot until they saw the whites of their eyes. He thought of Benjamin Burr who had gotten a letter of marque and reprisal from the president during the War of 1812 and with his swift barkentine had sunk and captured British vessels all over the world. He used to boast that he could capture anything he couldn't run away from. Suddenly his eyes jerked up to his father's. He remembered the name of Benjamin Burr's ship—the *Black Ant*. Jonathan looked down at the fleeing ants—Benjamin Burr, who had left the United States after the War of 1812 with his shipload of "rattlesnakes" to explore Central Asia, and who had never been seen again—what had happened to him?

Jonathan sensed that his father knew what he was thinking. Then there was his great-great-grandfather, one of the Union generals at the Battle of Bull Run, the first battle of the Civil War, and his son who was in command of the Federal artillery that stopped Pickett's charge at the Battle of Gettysburg—put an end to the South's chances in the Great Rebellion. Jonathan's eyes grew wider. There was the black sheep of the family, his great-great-great-great uncle, the sinister Aaron Burr, a hero in the Revolutionary War, who used to sit in his garden in Litchfield with a brace of dueling pistols and shoot the cherries off his cherry tree. The most deadly duelist in the Colonies, he almost became president, and finally tried to make a separate country out of the western United States.

Then there was his grandfather, a great genius at ballistics, who modernized the U.S. artillery system before World War I. He stared at his father and suddenly everything fell into place. He knew the reason for Colonel Burr's many mysterious trips, the secret absences, the reason for the hundreds of books in his study on the subject of "Spy Warfare" and "Counterespionage." Jonathan looked down at the brick path where the black warrior ants were still pursuing the defeated enemy. He turned to his father. "I think I see what you mean. That's us, isn't it—our family? We're the warrior ants, aren't we, Father?"

His father looked up from the brick walk. "Yes, we're the warrior ants," he said, "and for some reason we always have been." He looked up at Jonathan. "And I think we always will be." He leaned back against the ivy. "But never forget the other side of the picture, Jonathan." He smiled. "Remember, Jonathan, *a warrior's life is always forfeit*. No matter what anyone else does, he cannot bend, his code must be

inflexible, must be sterner, a code which minimizes the value of his own life, a code of sacrifice to the society he protects—to this republic. He has already been condemned to death by his profession, because death is part of his profession.” His father paused. “Also he has a code of honorable and truthful dealing with his brother warriors.”

Jonathan felt deeply moved. Suddenly he felt a responsibility, a destiny, a direction of flow of his life that he had never felt before. The atmosphere was so serious between him and his father that he couldn’t resist injecting a light note into it. “I guess another one of the rules, Dad, is to not ask too many questions about the secret plans of your senior warrior ants—just do your best in the dark.”

His father looked at him so seriously that for a moment Jonathan was afraid he had offended him. Then he leaned back against the ivy wall and laughed and brought his heavy hand down on Jonathan’s shoulder. “Spoken like a true black ant. Let’s go in and have lunch.”

As they passed through the front hall Jonathan looked with new interest at the old oil painting of the sea rover, Benjamin Burr—looked exactly like his father, the same beaked nose and blue humorous eyes. The painting clearly showed the thin white scar across his right cheek—the one he got in the saber duel when he killed the British officer in Paris—killed him with the same crucifix-hilted sword he was holding in the painting, the one that had belonged to the Chevalier Bayard. What had happened to his privateer, the swift barkentine *Black Ant* with its queer rigging—square sails on the foremast, and fore and aft sails on the fore and mizzen—designed for speed close-hauled in the teeth of the wind? His theory had paid off on every ocean of the world—“If you can sail closer and have even one small gun that can shoot

farther, weight of metal and speed and number of guns mean naught.”

What had happened to audacious Benjamin Burr himself? Was he killed trying to conquer Mongolia with five hundred men? Sometime, Jonathan thought, it would be interesting to track him down—find out what had happened to Benjamin Burr.

3 ♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning to Jonathan's delight his father talked about nothing but archery. They were sprawled out in the big, comfortable leather chairs in his father's study. The morning sun was glancing off the river two hundred feet below and making a pattern of moving ripples on the stained oak ceiling—the room was built like a ship, wood on all sides.

"You're an excellent shot with a bow, Jonathan. Very few people could have killed that mountain lion with one arrow the way you did last year in Arizona." He pulled a chair up in front of him and propped his feet on it. "But beginning in about five minutes you're going to have to unlearn almost everything you ever learned about archery." You and I have been using the English longbow. It is nothing more than a carefully shaped wooden stick."

Jonathan could hardly believe his ears. "But, Father, last year when we went deer hunting down in Pennsylvania you spent a whole day telling me how wonderful and scientific our English longbows were—how they won the battle of Crécy against the armored French knights—the great victory at Poitiers—Agincourt."

"That's all perfectly true," his father said shortly. "But

I've learned a lot since then. The longbow is largely British propaganda." He paused. "I've been studying the battle of Nicopolis—the battle that put a stop to the Crusades. The Turks were Johnny-come-latelys to the Middle East. They showed their new secret weapon there—the laminated bow. It could kill a European knight in full armor at 500 yards. The longbow could cast an arrow barely half that far."

His father got up and reached into the big carved wooden Italian chest. He took out the most extraordinary bow Jonathan had ever seen. It was short, not more than three feet long, but very thick and wide. It was curved into a semi-circle with the sharpest part of the curve at the ends. The outside seemed to be made of shiny black horn while the inside of the curve was covered with fine-grained turquoise blue leather. The leather was beautifully embossed with gold designs.

"This bow," said the colonel, "is over two hundred and fifty years old. It was made by the famous Hassan, the best bow maker in Adrianople, the Turkish fortress on the Turkish-Bulgarian border." He sat down and placed the middle of the bow against his knee. He grasped the ends with both hands and slowly straightened them out. Then he continued bending them into a reverse curve. Jonathan stepped back. "Look out, Dad, it'll break."

His father shook his head. "It has to go much farther than that before I can even put the string on. It's ancient, but it will cast an arrow farther than any modern bow." He strung it and handed it to Jonathan. It was now in the form of a cupid's bow.

"The Turks were very scientific a hundred and fifty years ago. We were barbarians in comparison. They actually made controlled experiments and discovered that the material with

the greatest compression strength to weight was wild water buffalo horn. They made their bows with that on the compression side." His father turned the bow over.

"Then they experimented further and found that the material which had the greatest tension strength per unit of weight was the tendons that came from the same wild buffalo's hind legs. They fixed these tendons in a plastic glue that was boiled out of the bones of the animal and put them on the tension side of the bow." He handed it back to Jonathan. "They needed something to separate the two sides of their sandwich and they found the material which has the greatest resistance to shear per unit of weight—ordinary maple wood." He pointed at the division lines between the three different materials. "This sandwich turned out to be the most terrible weapon of the dark ages. Genghis Khan conquered most of the world with it, and so did Tamerlane."

His father pulled the string back to his ear. "Some of the old Turks could shoot an arrow over 800 yards and one, their all-time champion Toz Kopran, held the record at 890 yards." His father handed the bow to Jonathan. "Armor wasn't much good because a good Mongol or Turkish bowman could put an arrow cleanly through a two and a half inch brass block."

Jonathan felt a deep sense of reverence for the beautiful weapon as he turned it over and over in his hands. He tried to imagine the deep secrets of craftsmanship that had gone into it, and the pride of the maker after it was finished. More than anything in the world at that moment, he wanted to own it himself. He looked up and saw that his father was reading his mind.

"Jonathan, we are going to practice every day, both mounted and on foot. I've had some canvas dummies made—just man size." He leaned back in the big leather chair.

“When you can put twenty out of twenty arrows into one at one hundred yards dismounted, and then the same number at a full gallop, at twenty yards, the bow is yours.”

Jonathan stared at the dense black horn, divided at the mid-section by a narrow piece of yellow ivory. His father touched it reverently. “That white piece is the *soul* of the bow. Mohammed, the prophet, said, ‘The bow is the weapon of Islam.’ The Turks and most of the Mongols that used it were Mohammedans. They always kissed that center piece of white ivory and asked God’s blessing before they shot it.” His father opened the chest again. “Also they had padded boxes they could shoot arrows into, indoors. Every good soldier, to keep in shape, had to shoot seventy-five arrows into that box, rain or shine, every day of his life.”

His father was taking more things out of the chest. “Here are some spare strings. Skeins of unbleached silk threads. Here are the arrows and the thumb ring for pulling the string back.” He held up a flat piece of horn with a little four-inch trough attached to it. “This is the siper. The Turks knew that the shorter and lighter their arrows were, the faster they went. The English arrows were big and slow and heavy, but the Turks knew speed was more important than weight. If you double the velocity of an arrow you multiply its hitting power by four.” His father attached the siper to his thumb with a buckle. “When you pull a short light arrow like this back to your ear, its point comes back beyond the bow. The siper is to guide it and keep it from going through the archer’s hand when he looses it. He lays the arrow in the trough so it can come way back and be guided past the bow when he releases it.” Jonathan tried the siper on.

“Let’s go out and try these out. What’s the thumb ring for?”

“The bow is so strong you just can’t pull it back with your fingers the way you can our bows.” His father put the ring on his thumb. “You put your thumb around the bow string so that the ring pulls back on the string. Then you lock your index finger around your thumb. It’s a perfect lock—when you let your finger go, your thumb straightens out and the ring releases the arrow.”

That morning in the shooting field Jonathan was fascinated with the Turkish bow. It felt strange—couldn’t hit anything with it, probably only a matter of practice. Its power was out of all proportion to the strength needed to pull it back. Its cast was unbelievable. “Why don’t they make these now?” he asked.

“No one has the time,” his father said. “It took the old artisans over five years to make a good Turkish bow, and they knew secrets about making them we don’t know today.

“Watch this, Jonathan.” His father pulled the bow back to his ear and shot an arrow almost vertically into the air. Instantly there was a screaming whistle so deafening that Jonathan screwed his eyes shut and ducked his head—sounded like a two-foot-long fingernail being dragged across a mile-long blackboard.

“A whistling arrow. The Mongols often started their battles that way.” He handed an arrow to Jonathan. It had a blunt ivory point. “The little hole drilled at an angle there on the side catches the air and causes all the racket.”



4 ♦ ♦ ♦

As the days went by and the pace of their work got more grueling Jonathan felt himself getting tougher. Gradually he found ways to offset the greater physical strength of his father by his natural quickness and skill. He felt his own strength increasing too. The bar bell exercises twice a week and the wrestling took care of that.

In wrestling it was almost hopeless to try to win over his father, but judo was another matter. His quickness helped there. They finally got to the point where each would win about the same number of matches each day.

Jonathan found that once he caught onto the peculiarities of the Turkish laminated bow he quickly became even more skillful than his father. He found it difficult, though, getting used to shooting the arrow from the right instead of the left side of the bow. It was hard to get the knack of the ivory thumb ring which pulled back the cord, but without it he couldn't pull the powerful bow back to his ear. Jonathan never quite got over the fantastic power of the ancient Turkish weapon—the fact that he could loose an arrow into the air and have it instantly vanish like a bullet shot from a gun.

He was not as good a horseman as his father and was therefore at a disadvantage shooting arrows from horseback. As the days went by, though, he gradually got to the point where, as he galloped by at full speed, he could put nine out of ten arrows into the man-size body of the canvas dummy they used as a target. He despaired of ever attaining the twenty out of twenty necessary to win the bow for himself.

Their afternoon fencing matches with the hooked swords were, next to the wrestling, the most grueling part of the day, and although he would not say why, Jonathan's father evidently considered it their most important exercise. The clumsy hooked weapons became more deadly and graceful as, one by one, they discovered the lost ancient tricks of their use.

One morning Jonathan felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "I hope we can show you some day," he said, "what valuable work you have been doing here. It could all be for nothing, but again it may be extremely important. I wish, Jonathan, we could tell you the reasons for all this but it's a question of military security. Maybe you've already guessed what we are trying to do." His father looked at him with such a peculiar expression on his face that Jonathan got the idea he wouldn't be too sorry if he found out—if only *he* didn't have to tell him.

Late that afternoon Jonathan drove down to Washington and stopped in at the Library of Congress. "I am anxious," he said to one of the librarians, "to read anything I can find written in Turkish, or translated from the Turkish, about explorations to out-of-the-way places in Asia."

The librarian gave him a startled look. "That's only the

second time anyone has made such a request. The first one was yesterday."

Jonathan stared at him. "Who was it?" He could have bitten his tongue off for being so crude.

The librarian smiled regretfully. "We never give out information about other borrowers, but," he said, reacting to Jonathan's crestfallen expression, "I can show you the same book he saw. It's by the famous Turkish explorer Baltege Pasha who was a courtier of the great sultan of the Ottoman Turks, Suleiman the Magnificent." He smiled. "I'll get it for you." He came back a few minutes later. "He must still have it out. You'll have to wait until it comes back."

Night after night Jonathan browsed in the Library of Congress. He searched the vast index of millions of books and pamphlets looking for any slight clue that might put him on the right course. Somewhere in that vast pile of books was the information he wanted, if he could only find it.

One night he discovered that the great missionaries of Asia were the Nestorian Christians. They were particularly active after the conquests of Genghis Khan had made travel in Asia safe. He found an old list of missions dated 1200 A.D. that the Nestorian church had either set up or planned to set up. He read down the list: Ceylon, Malabar, Madras, Travancore, Province of Shensi, Tartary, the Karith, Bur-anulke (Pala Larin Diyari). Jonathan's eyes stopped. His heart was pounding. Pala Larin Diyari was a Turkish phrase. It meant "The Land of the Hooked Swords."

Another night of furious digging found him the name of the Nestorian missionary who had been sent to convert that area to Christianity. It was St. Thomas of Kana. An old English translation of part of his original report was in the

rare documents' section of the library. Jonathan was allowed to read it only under the supervision of a guard.

In the Year of our Savior 1225, when our Lord, Genghis Khan had been Emperor for nineteen years, I was traveling in eastern Asia under the firman of the Great Khan. Everywhere I was given freedom to spread the word of Jesus to the unbelievers, the Buddhists, the Brahmanists, the Moslems, the Shamanists, and the devil worshipers for the Great Khan believed that all religions were good if they were peaceful.

July of 1225 found me in the Dynze Daban Mountains near Buranulke, the fabled land of the hooked swords, where I came upon a strong Mongol fortification of the type designed for maintaining contested frontiers. It had crenelated battlements and a strong central keep and was surrounded by a deep moat full of water. All was ready for instant defense. Inasmuch as the only borders of our Lord Genghis Khan's domain are the trackless oceans and the northern ice, I was much astonished. I was more astonished when I was informed that this was in fact a frontier and that my firman was no better than a worthless piece of parchment beyond it. When I told them I was sure the Khan's domain extended from ocean to ocean, the Mongols appeared much humiliated and said that unfortunately this was not strictly true. They said that Buranulke, the Cyclone Country, so small a good man on horseback could ride around it in five days, had never been conquered by the Khan's armies. The vertical cliffs of the Cyclone Country, some of which stretched almost to the sky, and the ferocity of its soldiers had kept out the Khan's armies, although thousands had died in the attempts to storm it. I told them that although I acknowledged the authority of our Lord Genghis Khan I was also an ambassador of Our Lord Jesus Christ whose influence was not stopped by military borders. I requested permission to go into the country to convert the inhabitants to Christianity as I had done over the rest of Asia. The Mongols said I could go in if I wished but they looked at my thin legs and thinner arms and smiled and joked among themselves. The Ming Bashe roared with merri-

ment and clapped me on the shoulder with his mailed hand. "Every man who enters the Cyclone Country is made to play the terrible game of Ott. He must fight on horseback against many opponents under complex regulations." They laughed. "Only once in two hundred years has someone lived through the terrible game of Ott and he has always been a fearful man of war, like us, not a man of peace, like you."

Although martyrdom would assure me of my place in the hereafter, I decided to first convert the thousands that could easily be brought under the banner of our Lord, and, when I had finished, then go back to Buranulke to leave my bones to whiten there as a martyr to the work of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jonathan was disappointed to find that none of St. Thomas' other writings had further reference to Buranulke or to the terrible game but he couldn't blame the old boy for not wanting to buy that situation. A bit out of his line.

A few nights later Jonathan was searching through some old musty Turkish sources on Asiatic exploration. Just as he was about to give up in disgust he again came across a mention of St. Thomas of Kana in the summary of a report of Baltege Pasha, the great Turkish explorer who lived about 1530 during the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Again he asked for the old Elizabethan English translation of the ancient Turkish report.

After considerable delay and much telephoning and sending of messages back and forth with pneumatic tubes, the librarian told Jonathan that the book had been reported lost by the borrower. Jonathan had a premonition that something very important had happened. "I'd like to find out the name of the person who borrowed that book and lost it," he said. "I'm doing research work on exploration in Central Asia and

he might have remembered material he read in the book which would be of interest to me."

The librarian went back to a telephone that was out of earshot and carried on a lively conversation with someone. When he hung up Jonathan knew what the answer would be by his expression. The scared, rabbit little man smiled apologetically. "We cannot give out that information, but anyway it is not necessary for you to have it. Most of our rare documents have been microfilmed. We can run off a microfilmed copy for you and you can keep it. There will of course be a slight charge for service."

The next evening Jonathan was sitting in the darkroom before the microfilm reader. The three-hundred-year-old printing of the English translation looked incongruous on the futuristic looking screen of the electronic viewer. Finally he found what he had been looking for. His blue eyes widened.

Although traveling under the firman of his Celestial Highness the Ming Sultan of Kittai (Cathay) and of my own Lord, the Sultan Suleiman of Turkey, he who is called "The Magnificent," and sometimes "The Lawgiver," yet I found my safety rested only in the curved swords of the two hundred Janizaries of my bodyguard. Being a student of the times of our Lord Genghis Khan and having read the writings of St. Thomas of Kana and other explorers, I was loath to leave Kittai (Cathay) without seeing Buranulke, the legendary Cyclone Country. We had heard of the Terrible Game of Ott played in that country and read about it, and the Ming Bashe in command of my Janizaries, Tunch Belek Pasha, known to all as the "Brass Hammer," asked my permission to go into the country across its border and challenge their champions in this Terrible Game. Inasmuch as Tunch Belek was the greatest warrior in the Janizary corps at the Top Kapa Serai (Cannon Gate Palace) in Stamboul, I acceded to his request, not only as a way of bringing great additional honor to Turkish arms,

but also with the hope that Turkey might establish an unconquerable bastion in the trackless Asiatic ocean of grass.

The Terrible Game of Ott is, we are told, a series of tests with weapons on horseback against warrior opponents. Ming Bashe Tunch Belek Pasha was six and a half feet tall, weighed two hundred and fifty pounds and was the best swordsman in the Ottoman Empire. He could take an iron horseshoe in his bare hands and straighten it out into a bar. In full armor he could leap on the back of his horse without using the stirrups, and no one in either the Janizary Corps or the Spahis could bend his mighty bow. He loved the clamor of battle even more than the many beauties of his harem.

His name, "Tunch Belek" (Brass Hammer), came from his favorite weapon, a massive brass sledge that the other Janizaries could scarcely lift. He would whirl it around his head in a golden circle and crush the heaviest armor like a bear's paw smashing a glass goblet.

On the fortieth day after our day of departure from the court of the Ming Sultan of Kittai we were still riding through the endless flat grasslands of Asia. A sea of grass so vast and endless that we navigated by a lodestone hung from a silk thread, and by the stars. The Janizaries of my bodyguard sweated like horses inside their hot chain armor because the attacks by the desert nomads were so constant and ferocious that we had to ride hot and sweltering always ready for instant battle. We grew to hate the flat sameness of the landscape and longed for the rolling green hills of Stamboul, the blue waters of the Marmora and the emerald green of the Princes Islands. We despaired of ever returning to the cool groves of the Top Kapa Serai with its magnificent kitchens and everything made for our pleasure, and for that of our Lord, the Great Sultan.

Finally on the fortieth day we came to a range of black polished stone mountains that shot steep-sided into the sky like an explosion of black stone in a flat world of grass. There was no transition. The black precipices leapt vertically upward in

two-hundred-foot walls out of the plain on which we were standing. They were backed by tier after tier of black cliffs getting taller and taller until they vanished in the black clouds of heaven. Our guides shook with fear and told us this was Buranulke, sometimes known as Pala Larin Diyari, the land of the hooked swords, and that we would do well to flee for our lives. When we insisted on riding around the base of the precipice, they became uncontrollably frightened and fled saying that the black cliffs were cehennem Yolu, the stairway to hell.

For two days our little troop of Janizaries rode around the vast explosion of rock. At all times, although we rode in the bright hot sunlight, we could see the wild storms, burans, the nomads called them, howl around the vertical peaks above us. Every minute of every day, and particularly at night, we could look up and see the bright forks of lightning and hear the rumble of thunder come down from this frightening vertical land in the sky.

At the end of the second day we came to a narrow path leading sharply up between the precipices. It was well traveled, apparently the gateway to the Cyclone Country. We fortified ourselves for the night within a circle of sharp stakes, as was our custom, and Ming Bashe Tunch Belek took his leave.

"I will ride in alone," he said, "and win the Terrible Game and I will return to you here as soon as possible." He whirled his great hammer around his head in a salute. "If I am not back within four days, say a prayer for me in the new mosque, the Yeni Jami. One thing you will know, and that is that I will have done credit to our Lord, the Sultan, and to the great Turkish race from which we spring." He saluted again. "But I will be back Inchallah," which means "Allah being willing."

We posted guards and watched the Brass Hammer ride over the border. We saw a group of warriors in lacquered armor of ancient Mongol design emerge to meet him at the edge of the dense forest. They treated him with great courtesy and conducted him into the darkness of the mighty woods.

We waited for a week and the Brass Hammer did not appear. Allah was not willing. We never saw him again.

On the seventh day we sadly broke camp and were riding off when we were furiously attacked out of the pass by about a hundred mounted warriors. Although we outnumbered them two to one, my Janizaries were thunderstruck by their terrible weapons, hooked swords which not only cut like ours, but which were also used as hooks to snatch our men off their horses. Half my Janizaries lay dead or wounded on the field before we finally drove them off.

We retreated slowly dragging with us two live captives from the Cyclone Country who had been knocked senseless during the battle. We disarmed them and bound them to their horses until they finally returned to their senses. They were so terribly disturbed when they saw we were crossing the Timur River that they had to be forcibly carried across it. They explained that once they crossed that river they were no longer soldiers of Buranulke and that if they then returned they would be forced to play the Terrible Game of Ott like any outsider. Crossing that river made them exiles forever because, they assured us, no one living could ever survive the Terrible Game.

We felt compassion for them and as, to our great astonishment, they spoke the same type of Turkish we did, we became more friendly each day. Finally we trusted them and returned their arms and armor and made much of them and treated them so kindly that eventually they became reconciled to coming back with us to Stamboul. We were much puzzled that our two countries, thousands of miles apart, both spoke Turkish. When we gave the prisoners back their weapons, the deadly hooked swords, they seemed very happy.

They spoke with enthusiastic admiration of Brass Hammer. They said he had gone farther in the game of Ott than anyone had in the memory of this generation. Never in the memory of anyone living had such a warrior as Tunch Belek appeared among them. During the course of the game of Ott his whirl-

ing brazen sledge had killed fifty-six of the Khan's finest warriors before he was finally slain himself—in the last stage. It was clear to them that he was defeated only by his great weight. His horse had become so tired by the last stage that the whole field caught up with him and engaged him at once. Although he put up an heroic battle on foot and killed many of them with his terrible brazen hammer, he was finally overwhelmed and slain. They buried him with the great honors his heroism deserved and are planning to erect a massive monument over his grave. A life-sized ageless statue of brass, so that his mighty hammer will whirl around his head through the ages until that last frightful day when the earth is covered with black smoke and the angel Izrafil blows the second blast of extermination.

Although our captives were reluctant, they finally told us some details concerning the Game of Ott, a game every outsider is forced to play if he enters their country. They said it consisted of a number of tests of swordmanship, horsemanship, skill with the bow, skill at spearing a hanging ring with a lance, and skill in wrestling. The outsider is given a head start, mounts his horse and goes to the first test. Only when he completes it can he progress to the second, and so on to the third until he finishes. After an interval, two hundred carefully picked warriors start after him. When they come to the first task, which is shooting a wild alce, a huge deer, with an arrow, each man must stay until he has killed an animal. Then he can proceed to the second task. If the pursuers complete their tasks more quickly and catch up with the outsider, they can try to kill him or he them. If he completes all the tasks before they catch up with him, he wins and becomes the most honored hero of the Cyclone Country.

The next morning just at dawn we were attacked by nomadic Mogols and during the course of the battle we lost twenty-five additional Janizaries. Among the dead were our two captives. They had distinguished themselves greatly by their bravery and skill in battle. I much regretted their loss as I was anxious to go into the exact details of the Terrible Game. Their deadly hooked swords are now crossed above the fire-

place in the weapons kiosk of my palace in Stamboul. Every visitor admires the beautiful figures damascened on their blades. One shows a horseman spearing a hanging ring, the other a horseman, bow drawn back, shooting a great deer with webbed horns.

Jonathan closed his eyes and then opened them and stared out over the huge room without focusing on anything—he couldn't have described them better himself—so that was where their two swords came from—so that was what his father was planning to do! But why? He glanced down at the yellow old map and then compared it with the most detailed one of this same area in the library. He was surprised to see that the ancient country of Buranulke was located about ten miles from a modern railroad right-of-way. He looked at the name and a little shiver fled up and down his back. It was the Trans-Baikal Railroad which connected European and Asiatic Russia.

He looked out the open window at the rushing traffic on East Capitol Street; the smell of gasoline fumes and the noise of brakes and racing engines brought him back with a jerk. His mind flashed back to the night the president and his father had been talking in the room below him—so this was the railway the president had mentioned so often!

Four hundred and thirty years later his father was to be the Brass Hammer of this new nation, the United States. He would try to succeed where Tunch Belek Pasha, the mighty Ming Bashe of the Janizary Corps had failed and perished. An icy hand seemed to be groping around in Jonathan's chest. He closed his eyes and felt ill. Suddenly some of the snatches of that conversation between his father and the president came back to him—"The Trans-Baikal Railway"—"This might be the greatest spy operation in history"—"The new atomic

howitzer.” Suddenly the whole picture started to focus in his mind. He looked at the two maps. The land of the hooked swords was only ten miles from the Trans-Baikal Railway. He went to the reference shelf and opened up a standard reference book on railways.

The single track of the Trans-Baikal Railway, which has been blasted in one of the greatest engineering feats of the ages through the peaks and bridged over the gorges of the Dynze Daban mountains, is the most important connecting link between European and Asiatic Russia.

Jonathan’s thoughts raced ahead of his reading—one of the new atomic howitzers located in Buranulke could destroy the only link between the U.S.S.R.’s two concentrations of military might. Evidently Russia, like Genghis Khan, had been unable to conquer the Cyclone Country—it was still there, a tiny cancer in Russia’s huge body. After all these centuries a hero was needed to win the Terrible Game of Ott, so that a base could be set up there for the free world—hundreds of miles inside Asiatic Russia.

Jonathan opened his eyes and looked over at the whiteness of the U.S. Capitol building. So the warrior ant was going to meet his destiny—death.

Jonathan felt a strange sense of elation. “And so is his son,” he said grimly to himself. “This is a job for two.”

5 ♦ ♦ ♦

The next night about six o'clock Jonathan parked his car in front of the Metropolitan Club on Connecticut Avenue and H Street. Norman, the dignified colored doorman who had guarded the entrance to the club ever since Jonathan could remember, greeted him effusively.

"Well, bless my soul, it's Master Jonathan. And how are you this evening and how is the colonel, your father? It's like old times to have a member of the Burr family coming into the club after working hours." He put an ivory peg in the hole opposite Jonathan's name on the membership list. "But it doesn't happen often enough. The general, your grandfather, came in here almost every night. That is, of course, after your grandmother died. He used to sit in the front room on the second floor and sip one glass of Chateau Margeaux claret and then go in and have dinner. He was a very fine gentleman."

Jonathan grinned. He had loved Norman all his life. To him the Metropolitan Club *was* Norman, the man who decided who was bowed courteously in the door and who got his extremely polite, "Is there anyone you would like to see, sir?"

Norman took Jonathan's hat and coat and hung them in the cloakroom just across from his desk. "Master Jonathan, you're getting so big and strong and heavy, just like your father."—Jonathan had never seen him look so solemn—"From now on I'll have to stop calling you Master Jonathan and call you Mr. Burr." For some reason Jonathan felt warm and contented inside—an outpost had been passed. "For the first time, Norman," he laughed, "I feel I'm really a member of this club and not the son of a member." Norman looked at him with serious eyes. "You were a member, Mr. Burr, two generations before you were born." His smile had vanished and he suddenly became efficient. "Mr. Trevelyan has returned your call, Mr. Burr."

Jonathan grinned when he heard Joe's quick "Hello" at the other end of the wire—what a break to have his college roommate working for a big shot like Senator Grimes.

"Hello, you old rascal, I'm a constituent and I want a political favor."

Joe's spontaneous laugh was like a breath of fresh air. "Jonathan, you broken-down political hack, shoot. What is it?"

"After what you tell me, Joe, about your daily rat race, I hate to bother you about a minor problem, but it may turn out to be important." He paused. "It's in connection with a paper I'm writing for the old man. I need a translation of an old report, written by a Turk named Baltege Pasha, about a trip he took over four hundred years ago through Central Asia. The very day I tried to borrow it from the Library of Congress someone else took it out, and now they tell me the document's been lost."

Jonathan wished he were talking to Joe face to face instead of over the telephone. "I'm almost sure someone is trying to

hold it out on me, keep me from reading it. I've got a photostat but I want the original document." Jonathan wondered what Joe was thinking. "I asked the library *who* took it out and lost it, and they said they never give out information like that." He looked out the window at the traffic flowing along Seventeenth Street. "Can you find out who it was, Joe, through the contacts your boss has over at the library?"

Jonathan felt a flood of relief when Joe's laugh echoed in the receiver. "If everyone brought me a problem that easy I'd relax and get fatter than King Farouk. I'll call you before noon tomorrow."

"I'm going to be banging around town most of tomorrow, Joe. Let me call you at home after dinner."

The next morning at breakfast Jonathan watched his father cut off a huge slice of liver and balance it on the end of his fork. "You're really a gay blade, Jonathan. You've been in town every single night for two weeks." He pushed the liver into his mouth and chewed and swallowed it. "You come in late at night, get less than eight hours' sleep, and yet the next morning you seem to be just as efficient as if you'd slept twelve hours. What do you do down there every night? I'll bet you're taking a cake baking course at night school. Or maybe you've got a girl friend in town."

Jonathan sipped his orange juice. "It's just a matter of self-defense, Dad. We're speaking so much Turkish that I was forgetting my English. I've been practicing up with my friends every night." He grinned. "I'm getting so I can speak it about as well as Turkish."

His father washed down another slice of liver with a big gulp of milk. "Well, that's better than refusing to answer because of the Fifth Amendment."

The last week had shown the swiftest development of any time during their training. Jonathan was certain no two antagonists had ever been better matched than he and his father. Exactly, he thought, like a story he had once read about the Roman Emperor, Commodus, the most famous athlete in the ancient world. He used to engage in swordplay with his best friend, Ducconius Furfur. They were so evenly matched and so uncannily skillful in defense, that for years they fenced with each other almost daily, with sharp swords, each trying his best to kill the other, but knowing that he could never do it.

Three whole days had passed without either Jonathan or his father even touching the other in their swordplay. During a rest period Jonathan mentioned the Emperor Commodus. "Why don't we practice from now on without our armor and helmets. We just don't need them any more, Dad."

His father grunted. "You didn't read far enough in your history book, Jonathan. The emperor and his friend got more and more confident until all sense of danger left them." His father was not smiling. "One morning Ducconius made a little unimportant slip. In an instant his dying body was stretched at the emperor's feet. Like a gun, a sword is always loaded." His father always used a certain tone of voice when he spoke of general rules of behavior. "In things like this, Jonathan, you always go up or down—never sideways. If we took off our armor, sooner or later one of us would be killed." Jonathan felt his father's eyes searching for his. "Someone is going to get killed soon enough, Jonathan—someone very important. I don't want it to be one of us."

His father could still beat him in wrestling, and he was more skillful in horsemanship, but Jonathan was now more

accurate with the Turkish bow than his father. Dismounted, he could almost always put twenty out of twenty arrows into the canvas dummy at a hundred yards. His father sometimes missed one or two. Galloping by at top speed, though, his best score at twenty yards was eighteen out of twenty arrows in the target. His father could usually bury the whole twenty in the straw body.

By this time their Turkish was so fluent that they had no language problems whatsoever. They thought, ate, fought, laughed and argued in Turkish, and Jonathan even found himself counting and scoring in the strange tongue.

It was Saturday and he had the afternoon off. Jonathan called up Joe Trevelyan from the Metropolitan Club. He sensed a suppressed excitement in Joe's voice. "Jonathan," he said, "I found out about your document. It was taken out by that son-of-a-you-know-what, Congressman Eldridge W. Norwich. You know, the one that's gotten all the publicity about being a Russian sympathizer, the one who spent a month traveling around Asia with Krushchev."

Jonathan could hear him rattling some papers. "We've had some mighty funny reports through the office on him, Jonathan. For example, at one of the big Russian diplomatic blasts, somebody from our State Department was thumbing through a book that was lying on the table near the canapes. He was surprised to see it came from the Library of Congress. He was smart enough to remember the name of the book and hand the information in. We checked and found our friend, Congressman Norwich, was the one who had borrowed the book for them." Jonathan felt his heart pounding in his chest as he heard Joe's laugh. "I guess he's the Russian Embassy's cut-out with the Library of Congress."

Jonathan hoped his laugh didn't sound too much like a croak.

"We found out another amusing thing, Jonathan. A couple of days after the Library of Congress asked the congressman for the book, an inquiry came back from his secretary asking who wanted it." Jonathan opened his mouth but no words came out. Finally he heard a stammering sound. It did not sound a bit like his own voice. "Did the library tell them who I was, Joe?"

"When the congressman finally called them up himself, they did, yes. What's the matter, Jonathan, your voice sounds peculiar."

"It's just a poor connection, Joe, and, it's so hot in this booth I'm practically strangling. Thanks a lot, fella, for the information." Jonathan stumbled blindly out of the club to his car. He saw a crowd of people waiting for a bus. They all seemed to be staring at him as he savagely tried to blink the tears from his eyes. He remembered his father's words, "All I can tell you, Jonathan, is that it is important and that you can't say anything about it to anyone." His eyes were blinded by tears. He circled around Dupont Circle and started out Massachusetts Avenue.

A direct path right from the Russian Embassy to him—and his father. He clenched his fist. That fatal and terrible curiosity of his. It had always been the curse of his life, had gotten him into more trouble than everything else put together. How could he face his father now? He had to tell him, but how? He remembered the president's words, "Might be the greatest spy operation in history." It might not, too, because the spy had a worthless son that never thought about anything but his curiosity. Jonathan slammed

the seat beside him with his fist. This time curiosity would kill more than a cat.

The Russians had his name now, and of course his father's. Their plan was uncovered. He stared up the avenue ahead of him. One thing was sure, the Russian Embassy would not have asked for that document if they had not had the same idea. Now they would do everything in their power to smash up his father's operation—get to Buranulke first. The whole character of this operation had been changed by his carelessness. Now it was an open race between Russia and the United States who would get to Buranulke first—with someone who could win the "Terrible Game."

He remembered his father's words that morning out by the brick path when they were watching the ants. "There is one thing about being a warrior ant—your life is forfeit when you are born." Jonathan knew his was also forfeit for another reason. He had enormously increased the danger his father would face in this suicide mission.

Jonathan had always thought every problem had some solution—must be a solution to this one somewhere.

He turned to the right and down the hill. He needed time to think before facing up to his father. He found himself driving slowly along Rock Creek Drive, down under the Connecticut Avenue bridge and over the ford into the zoo. As usual, it was full of hundreds of children with their nurses, baby carriages, parasols, people eating peanuts, drinking pop, rolling down hill, holding hands and some even looking at the animals. He drove up the hill, turned right on Sixteenth Street and drove slowly down past the Roosevelt Hotel and the Masonic Temple, and through the tunnel under Scott's Circle.

Suddenly his body grew rigid. There on the left, just north

of the Racket Club, was a big white marble building—the Russian Embassy. It looked so honest and aboveboard there on Sixteenth Street. It seemed incredible that there were human beings inside that pure white façade plotting the destruction of the free world. Someone, perhaps right now, was thinking of the name Jonathan Burr, and Colonel Burr, and what should be done to stop them. Jonathan felt a hatred that was almost electric pass between himself and the innocent looking white building, and suddenly he knew what he had to do. He turned sharply to the right—just a question of figuring out the details.

Half an hour later, he was driving up River Road to the intersecting road that led to his home. The usual group of automobiles was stopped along the road with curious people looking through the fence at the animals. Just like the zoo, he thought. He jammed on the brakes. There was something close to the fence, something sprawled in an unnatural position on the grass. It was one of the Prejvalsky's horses. It was his own, Genghis Khan. No horse, even a wild one, looked that way unless he was dead.

Jonathan sprang out of his car and ran to the fence. Even at that distance the bright red blood flowing from the pony's head told the story. He had been shot. Around him the grass was trampled as if he had struggled wildly against death before he died. Winding back over the field Jonathan saw a trail of blood—a blind man could have followed it. The pony had been shot somewhere else and had gotten this far before he died. Jonathan's eyes followed down where the trail of blood led, down to the end of a little gully about a quarter of a mile away. There he saw another dun colored body—the other horse.

Jonathan reached the other body the same time his father

did. His father's eyes were narrow blue slits of anger. "Who could have done a senseless thing like this?" he asked quietly. "Who? Who would gain by doing a thing like this?"

Jonathan felt an anguished stab in his breast as he saw his father's expression. I killed the horses, he kept telling himself—just as if I had shot them with my 218 Winchester Bee.

His father's voice sounded like a steel file. "I've been working all around the acreage on the inside of the fence with the dogs, trying to pick up a scent—no reaction at all. One thing is certain. No one came on our land to shoot the horses. It must have been done with a high-velocity rifle." Jonathan looked up beyond the vertical banks of the wash to where he could barely see the body of the first horse. He looked down at Tamerlane—no signs of a struggle. It had been a perfect shoulder shot—had dropped him on the spot.

There was not much blood where the bullet went in, but a thin stream of blood was flowing from underneath. "Must have been a steel jacketed bullet," said Jonathan. "It came out the other side." They turned the pony over. The exit hole was not much bigger. Jonathan felt an excitement rising up in him. He pointed up the hill toward the other pony. "The bullet must have come down between the banks of that wash. The pony didn't move a step after it got hit. Unless someone shot him from a helicopter, we know exactly where the bullet had to come from."

Jonathan held his hand on his belt. "The bullet must have been flying at about this height. With the trees jam-packed the way they are back in the woods, one of them certainly stopped that bullet. We can dig it out, find out what it was."

Jonathan poked a stick in the ground exactly where the bullet had hit the horse. He broke the top off level with his belt. He walked back into the woods twenty yards behind

them and carefully sighted out a line that passed through the gorge from the road, and over the top of the stick. Jonathan turned one hundred and eighty degrees behind him. He let out a yell. There was a fresh scar and a deep hole in a big chestnut tree not ten yards away. It took only a minute to dig the bullet out. Ten minutes later Ferguson was on his way to the FBI laboratory on Constitution Avenue.

6 ♦ ♦ ♦

Jonathan and his father were in the middle of lunch when the FBI courier arrived. His father opened the letter, read it and sailed it across the table.

Dear Alex:

The specimen you sent was fired from a regulation Russian army rifle. We are filing our microphotographs of the groove pattern in case you ever want to identify the gun that shot it.

Sincerely,
Edgar

His father gazed out the window at the Potomac River. "I'm afraid, Jonathan, that my secret may be out. Speed is everything now—no more time for training." He stared at Jonathan. "I wish I could tell you about it." He paused. "A week from today I'm off on a trip. It may be a long one—a very long one—in fact I may never come back." His father speared a raw clam. "Where do you want to spend the rest of your summer vacation?" He hesitated. "Maybe you had better stay right here until I come back—or don't."

Jonathan felt himself getting tense—this was it. "I want to go where you're going, Dad," he said.

His father picked up the FBI letter and reread it. "I'm

afraid that's impossible, Jonathan. I can't even *tell* you where I'm going, much less take you with me."

Jonathan tried to hide his nervousness by gulping down a big forkful of apple pie. He wiped his mouth with his napkin. "I'll bet I know where you're going, Dad. If I can guess may I take my vacation anywhere I want?"

A spark of amusement lit his father's eyes. Jonathan saw a trace of regret there too. It was almost killing the old boy not to tell him the score.

"I'd give anything to tell you, Jonathan. I'd just love to have you guess—without any help from me." He shook his head. "It's unfair, though, to give you any hope." His father folded the napkin and got up. "Certainly, Jonathan, if it makes you feel any happier." Jonathan felt his father's big hand descend on his shoulder. He did not trust himself to look up.

"If you guess right, Jonathan, I'll see that you spend your vacation anywhere you wish. Just to show how generous I am, I'll give you three guesses."

Jonathan turned slowly and faced his father. "You're going to Hollywood to make a movie."

His father's laugh was as spontaneous as a sixteen-year-old boy's. "I wish I was, Jonathan. I'd love Hollywood. That's one guess gone to the bowwows."

Jonathan pretended to think. That last question was beginning to scare him to death. "You're going to Europe on a spy mission, but you will pretend to be a collector of ancient weapons."

His father did not laugh this time. Jonathan saw little pinpoints of suspicion in his intelligent blue eyes. Who was fooling who?

"Wrong again, Jonathan, and you knew you were wrong. Why?"

"Because, Father, I know where you're going—to Buranulke, the Cyclone Country—to try to win the Terrible Game of Ott."

The blue eyes flamed and then became cold, like pieces of slate.

"Who told you about this, Jonathan?"

"And, Father, for my vacation I want to go with you to play the Terrible Game—we could win it together easily."

His father did not appear to have heard him.

"Who told you about this, Jonathan?"

Jonathan started to tell him about his researches at the Library of Congress. As he told of the many setbacks he had had, and his solutions for them, he was intensely relieved to see the anger in the blue eyes reluctantly change to respect.

"That was using your head, Jonathan. You'd make a splendid spy." He looked out the window again. "I'm proud of you." His father looked at him again and Jonathan sensed that he was about to say something cagey. "Now, Jonathan, where do you really want to spend your vacation?"

"In Buranulke."

"But that's impossible." His father's voice was sharp and decisive. "For security reasons."

"But, Father, I know everything already—no one has to tell me a single thing." He sensed that it was time to be bold. "As far as security is concerned, Father, I could write a magazine article about the Game of Ott without violating anyone's confidence."

His father grinned. "You can't bluff your old man that way, Jonathan. You're just as loyal an American as I am." He

hesitated. "What would happen to your college education if you went?"

"I know that much about the Terrible Game, Father. If we haven't won by the time college starts, it will mean we are both dead. I love Yale, but I can always go there after my return. Going to Buranulke to play the Terrible Game would be the most wonderful experience any man could ever have."

"Like jumping off the Empire State Building." His father shook his head. "I promised you that if you guessed right you could go anywhere, but Jonathan, it's not only the game I'm worried about. In order to get into Buranulke you'd have to parachute in from a hundred thousand feet. Only a few people have ever tried it and darn few were alive when they landed. Also . . ."

"It's no more dangerous for me than for you, Father. After all, the U.S. army thinks I'm old enough to be drafted." He looked pleadingly at his father. "Besides, I'm a warrior ant too. Are you going to deny me my family profession?"

"I was just about to say, Jonathan, that it's impossible for another reason, too. If we both landed there, one of us would have to play the game first—that's their system. What if it was you, and what if you won? You would be in the mob trying to kill me the next day. It would not only be foolishness from our standpoint but for America as well to have us both go at once." His father stood there looking at him. "I don't like to promise you this, but I will. I'll arrange things here so that if I get killed you can have the next try at the Terrible Game—but I wish you wouldn't." He hesitated. "If anything happens to you now, the Burr family with all its centuries of tradition disappears—like a turned-out light."

Jonathan looked away. He didn't want his father to see that he had tears in his eyes. "Thanks, Dad. That means,

though, that I'll have to lose my father to get a crack at it—so let's pray I never do. I'll spend the summer right here, Dad, in case anything happens to you." Jonathan could see by his father's expression that the subject was closed.

"I hope you haven't forgotten, Jonathan, tonight we go to the Russian ambassador's dinner. The State Department is urging everyone to go as a gesture of international sportsmanship. After all, the parachute general they are honoring, General Ivan Belek, is their greatest Olympic athlete—the world's decathlon champion. We're not attending to honor a general, though. We're going to honor the international spirit of the ancient Olympic Games."

"I wonder why they asked me."

"I don't know. Maybe you're getting to that age. Maybe they got your name off the debutante lists or the Metropolitan Club membership list. Maybe they just want to see what kind of a son a person like me would have." His father turned toward the door. "Let's go out and take a ride on the polo ponies. They're quick and close-coupled, about as close as we can get now to the Prejvalsky Steppes horse."

Jonathan held back. "I'm going to feel awful funny going to the Russian Embassy tonight, Father."

"Just because the Russians killed our horses? Don't be foolish. Spy warfare is different from regular warfare. Up at the top echelon you usually have politeness and conversations with your enemy. You've got to get used to being nice to people who you know are trying to kill you—diplomatic to people you intend to kill yourself."

"There is another reason, though, Dad, something I've got to tell you. I hardly know where to start."

His father looked up. "Why don't you start at the beginning."

"The Russian Embassy knows, Dad, that we are interested in the Terrible Game and in going to Buranulke."

"What makes you think so? This operation has been so top secret I haven't even been able to tell my own son about it. Even in Central Intelligence and at the White House it's never referred to except by the name 'Operation World Series.'"

Jonathan told him about the book incident at the Library of Congress, how his inquiries concerning Boltege Pasha's history got back to the Russians through Congressman Norwich and formed a direct line from their project to the Russian Embassy. He saw his father's jaw clamp down and his lips compress into a thin line, but Jonathan hurried on, sparing no single detail, giving no excuse, until he had told all. He looked up. To his surprise there was a grim smile on his father's face.

"It's easy to see why you got asked to the party. The Russians want to take a look at you. The secret's out on both sides now. It's just a question of who can win—like a tennis game, or the Olympic Games—'Operation World Series' is a good name—the finals between the American League and the Soviet League.

"You did something extremely wrong, Jonathan." The smile had left his father's face. "A very wrong thing, Jonathan, but you did it through ignorance. I'm never going to mention it again because the situation itself is going to give you plenty of punishment. Your curiosity has put both our lives in serious danger, has jeopardized an important American military operation." He turned and started for the door. "Watch yourself tonight, Jonathan. I guarantee we'll be separated at the dinner table and probably even before. I can also guarantee another thing. You're going to get

umped for information—by real experts.” He took Jonathan’s arm as they walked down the hall. “Let me give you a good tip. The classical way to get information from a person is to give him valuable information so that he will give you some back. Take all their information tonight, Jonathan, but see they don’t get any from you.”

7 ♦ ♦ ♦

Jonathan parked the car in the little back parking lot of the Metropolitan Club, and he and his father walked past Lafayette Square and up 16th Street to the Russian Embassy. The big ornate reception room, a holdover from the time of the czars, was crowded—must have invited everybody in Washington. As his father had predicted, they got separated almost immediately. The councilor of embassy, a large florid-faced man, bustled up and bowed and disappeared with his father.

Jonathan inched slowly along in the file of persons leading up to the receiving line. There was no one around him he had ever seen before. He looked ahead and was startled by the fantastic difference in size between the tiny Russian ambassador and his gigantic guest.

The general, dressed in full Russian army regalia with a mass of decorations on his chest, stood at least six feet six and, although built in perfect proportion, was so massive physically that Jonathan estimated his weight at close to three hundred pounds. His features, obviously those of a Steppes Mongol, contrasted strongly with the pudgy Slavic features of the ambassador. The heavy beaked nose and

slightly tilted blue eyes, just the color of his father's, gave an impression of energy and strength so striking that Jonathan stared at him, fascinated.

Jonathan remembered the magazine and newspaper articles about the general, the extraordinary fact that he had not only won the decathlon in the Olympics, but also the Olympic wrestling championship, an absolutely impossible combination. Wrestlers are always too heavy for track and field sports—or were until the general came along. He had attended the Fort Benning Parachute School as a Russian observer during World War II, and Jonathan remembered the stories of the special thirty-five foot parachute that had been constructed to safely float his tremendous bulk to the ground. The upper weight limit of an American paratrooper was one hundred and eighty pounds, and the publicity pictures at the time showed him towering over his American companions-at-arms like a giant.

Suddenly he was next in line. The uniformed footman asked his name and turned to the ambassador. "Mr. Jonathan Burr," he said. Jonathan was sure it must have been his imagination but the ambassador seemed to show much more interest than he had in the other names. There was no doubt at all about the general. He acted as if Jonathan was the one man he had been trying to meet all of his life. His handshake had the power of a machinist's vise.

"Mr. Burr," he said in faultless English, "the great Yale athlete. I've been wanting very especially to meet you, Mr. Burr. I want to talk to you about Yale and the house plan and your intra-mural athletic system. I want to find out if it is applicable to our Russian system."

Jonathan remembered his father's advice and exerted himself to be gracious. "It's a real privilege to meet one of the

great athletes of this generation," he said. "It's a mystery to us here in America how a wrestling champion could high jump and pole vault and sprint fast enough to be the Olympic decathlon champion."

The general beamed down at him. "It's just a question of animal energy, Mr. Burr." His voice was deep and resonant. "Once you have it, you can point it like a sword in any direction you wish." He put his hand on Jonathan's arm. "I want to talk to you when we will not be hurried. I'll see you in a few minutes, Mr. Burr, as soon as I can escape from this," his white teeth showed, "rat race."

Jonathan moved toward the table where the drinks were being served. "What would you like to drink, sir?" It was the uniformed servant behind the bar.

"The drink most typical of your country," Jonathan answered.

The butler laughed. "That is a very hot one, sir." He poured some clear vodka into a short, wide-mouthed glass and ground some pepper into it from a big silver pepper mill. A number of large black chunks fell into the colorless liquid and sank to the bottom. Jonathan took a cautious taste and choked convulsively. It was much too strong and much too hot. He smiled politely at the butler through his tears. "Very good," he gasped.

A few minutes later a heavy-set man in a Russian major's uniform stood before him. "The general would like the pleasure of your company, sir, if you will be kind enough to follow me."

Jonathan thankfully abandoned his lethal drink and followed the officer up one of the twin flights of stairs at the west end of the reception room. They turned down a hall to a sumptuously appointed room about fifteen feet square. It

was obviously the ambassador's upstairs library. The general rose from his chair and grasped his hand.

"Now we can talk alone, Mr. Burr, without having people," he grinned, "breathe down the backs of our necks." Jonathan settled himself down in a deep, cool, leather armchair. The general, over Jonathan's strenuous objections, got up and prepared him another drink—looked like the same kind he had had downstairs, only with bigger and hotter chunks of pepper.

"We have a problem in Russia," the general began. "We are just as fanatic believers in the value of athletics as you Americans, but our distances are too great to make your type of intercollegiate athletics practicable." He sniffed at his drink. "If our students at Leningrad wanted to wrestle against the team in Khabarovsk, the round trip would be ten thousand miles." The general made a half-circle in the air with his right hand. "Almost halfway around the world." The general sipped his drink and smacked his lips. "It would be easier and quicker for the Leningrad team to wrestle Yale or Harvard."

Jonathan sensed that the general was using this example as a means of reminding him of the vast size and power of the U.S.S.R. It did make Russia sound impossibly big—must check the map when he got home. He looked up and saw that the general was gazing at him intently.

"Even bigger than Texas, Mr. Burr." The huge body shook with silent laughter. "If anything can ever be bigger than Texas."

Jonathan could not get over his astonishment at the streamlined mass of the general's body. No wonder he was such an unusual athlete.

"We realize," the general said, "that athletics can't exist

without contests. There's got to be a winner and a loser in every match—just like war.” The general took another sip of vodka and smacked his thick lips. “I understand there's one day in the fall when you can see seven or eight Yale-Harvard football games being played all at the same time in one place. How is that possible?”

“They're between the various units of the house plan. Yale and Harvard are divided into a number of internal colleges, like Oxford and Cambridge. They play each other during the year and then on the last day the top Yale house plays the top Harvard house, the second plays the second, etc.”

Something about the general's expression made Jonathan realize there was something else on his mind, something important. Without knowing why, Jonathan was sure now he was not in this conversation to talk about Yale-Harvard intramural football—he would trot it out sooner or later.

Jonathan explained the intramural system in considerable detail. He was surprised at the intelligence of the general's questions. He stopped in some confusion when he saw that the huge Mongol was again staring at him. “You're quite an athlete yourself, I hear, Mr. Burr—and I hear your father is also a famous athlete. What are your specialties?”

Jonathan took the tiniest little sip of his drink and smacked his lips just the way the general had—he barely kept himself from choking. “I'm the intercollegiate wrestling champion.” Jonathan looked at the Russian with frank admiration. “But I'd hate to climb into the ring with you—or even half of you.”

“You won't when you're a little older,” the general said magnanimously, “and by that time I'll be too old.”

“I also play a little football,” said Jonathan.

"Quite a little—this year's All-American fullback on all the sportswriters' lists," the general added genially.

Jonathan laughed. "Well, I'm glad you're not on the Harvard team, general."

"What does your father do?" the general asked.

Jonathan's modesty vanished. "He's the only ten-goal polo player in the United States," he said. "Also he's the national squash rackets champion. He's extremely good at any kind of athletics, just like you, general, tennis, golf, shooting, everything."

"Which of you is the best athlete?" the general asked.

"It's hard to say," Jonathan confessed. "He's better at some things and I'm better at others." He hesitated. "He's better at more things than I am."

"Who's the better at fencing?"

"Oh, he's much better, particularly with a saber," Jonathan said, and then stopped short. Suddenly he knew what the general was driving at—trying to find out which of them was going to Buranulke to try the Terrible Game. He stared at the general without speaking, hoping he had not let anything slip. Suddenly a thought came to him that was so shocking that he sat frozen there with his mouth open. Why hadn't he thought of it before!

The general himself was the Soviet Union's candidate for the Terrible Game of Ott. How could they possibly find anyone better? Jonathan's mouth closed with a snap. How could he or his father or anyone else on the planet stand a chance against the general in something like the Terrible Game? Undoubtedly the world's greatest all-round athlete, he would be invincible in this sort of contest.

Suddenly Jonathan realized that what he said in the little library in the Russian Embassy might actually affect history.

If the general got to Buranulke first and won the Terrible Game, America would forever lose its chance to control the Trans-Baikal Railway—Asiatic and European Russia would be united in their war potential.

If his father got there first and won, perhaps his skill, added to that of the rest of the pursuers, could defeat the general when he arrived later—and forever keep Russia out of Buranulke. His father would *have* to get to the Cyclone Country first. One thing was certain—if the general arrived first and won the Game, his father's death was an absolute certainty.

"You seem to be thinking of something very far away, Mr. Burr."

"Very far, general." A host of doubts rushed through his head. It would be taking a fearful risk—but if he said nothing at all the risk would be even greater—must lull the general into a sense of security somehow—delay him. He remembered the Manhattan Project during World War II. Hitler was ahead of the U.S. on atom bomb research, but he loafed along, not realizing that the Manhattan Project, the biggest crash program of all time, and the best kept secret, was rapidly catching up on him. Exactly the same problem here—must keep the general from hurrying to Buranulke. Jonathan jerked up his head and saw that the general was still waiting for his answer.

"My thoughts are very far away, general. They are in Buranulke and I am thinking of the Terrible Game of Ott."

There was not even a flicker in the slanted blue eyes. The general smiled. "Is that one of your Yale house plan units?" For a moment Jonathan thought he had made a frightful blunder—but that was impossible. Too many things made it

sure now that the general had to know—or at least the Russian Embassy knew. He took another sip of his drink.

“There is a time for guile and a time for frankness, general.” He sensed that appearing to be cynical and cold would help him here. “When there is no further reason for guile, mutual frankness can be a real pleasure, general. We know all about your proposed operation in Buranulke—and we know you know about ours.” He sniffed at his drink the way the general had. “My father and I have been training to play the Terrible Game of Ott under their ancient rules in Buranulke.” Jonathan tried desperately hard to look nonchalant and at ease. “We also have been informed, general, that you have been training for the same Game, too.” The general’s eyes still were completely noncommittal.

“We not only have rather good sources inside your own”—Jonathan paused—“apparatus, but your tried and true friend, Congressman Norwich, has talked rather freely about some of your problems. Not a very discreet man.” There, that hit home. A startled look had appeared on the general’s fleshy face. Jonathan sniffed at his drink again. Congressman Norwich would have to scramble like an egg to explain that away.

“But if you’d rather not talk about it, general, I think I’ll go down and have a little bite to eat.” Jonathan got to his feet.

A broad grin spread over the general’s face. “You win, Mr. Burr,” he said. “I don’t know where you got your information, but it is accurate.”

“Frankly,” said Jonathan, “I envy you the wonderful experience you’re going to have, playing the Terrible Game. And since it won’t affect us one way or the other, I wish you luck.”

The general tried to keep the surprised look off his face. He failed completely. "You wish me luck?"

"Yes."

"Why should *you* wish *me* luck?"

"Because, general, the joint chiefs have decided that we're not going to Buranulke after all."

"Why?" The general's voice was sharp.

"Because," said Jonathan, "we ran a mock-up of the Terrible Game the other day against an old National Guard cavalry outfit—a sort of trial heat to see what would happen if we really played the Game."

The general leaned tensely forward in his chair. "What happened?"

Jonathan paused for effect—very easy to overplay this hand. "Plenty," he said. "We lost. We proved conclusively that no matter how highly you're trained, and we are really trained for this Game, general, the very fact that you've got two hundred men after you gives them too enormous an advantage. It's impossible to win." He searched the general's eyes for some clue. What was he thinking behind those slightly tilted blue eyes?

"Both Father and I would give anything to try it," he continued, "but the joint chiefs-of-staff have decided it would be impossible for us to win under the ancient rules."

"Why, exactly?" demanded the general.

"Because," said Jonathan, "the Mongols in Buranulke are going to be an awful lot more skillful at their own game than our broken-down middle-aged National Guard regiment. They're going to know their country and know the course. They're using their own natural weapons, and they've been playing the Game for years."

The general's lips compressed into a thin line. "I am very sorry about this," said the general.

"Why?"

"Because they may feel it is not necessary for me to try it if you drop out. I want to try the Game very much for a special reason."

"What reason?" asked Jonathan. This habit of asking direct questions on things that were none of your business was catching.

The general relaxed and sat back in his chair. Again his white teeth shone in a smile. "You don't know my full name, do you?" he asked.

Jonathan thought a moment and then shook his head.

"It's Tunch Belek."

Jonathan looked at him open-mouthed. "The same name as the Ming Bashe . . ."

". . . in Boltege Pasha's history," finished the general. "That Ming Bashe, Tunch Belek Pasha, the Brass Hammer, was my ancestor."

"The one who killed fifty-six of the khan's soldiers?"

"The same one." The arrogant look returned. "I can win the Terrible Game, Mr. Burr." He spat out the words contemptuously. "And I hope your chicken-heartedness does not lose me my chance."

Jonathan suppressed a violent impulse to throw his drink into the general's face. He scrambled to his feet and controlled himself with an effort. "It is not my chicken-heartedness nor my father's," he said steadily. "It is a decision of the joint chiefs-of-staff. We can no more go to Buranulke without their consent than you can go if your Politburo objects." He smiled maliciously. "And when they hear the

sound track on our conversation here in this room tonight, perhaps you won't be going either."

Jonathan suddenly realized he must not break up the conversation—must prolong it until he had made his point. "And that will save your life. Your ancestor, Tunch Belek, might have killed fifty-six of the khan's soldiers but—even he finally got killed himself."

"He got killed only because of his horse," snapped the general.

"And so would we," said Jonathan. "Two hundred men on average horses can always catch one man, even if he is on a world champion thoroughbred."

"Nonsense."

Jonathan sat down. "It's just cold logic," said Jonathan. "You just pick your ten fastest horses and gallop them after him at top speed. He's got to go at almost top speed to get away from them—and burns up his horse in the process. In the meantime, the other hundred and ninety horses are coming along at their most efficient gait—the one they can keep up the longest. A horse is just like a ship. He uses ten times as much fuel at top speed as he does at his best hull speed. No horse is good enough to gallop fast and long too."

Jonathan wondered what the general was thinking. There was no doubt but that the room was tapped. They would go over the sound tape time and time again to see if they had missed anything. They must be absolutely positive he and his father were not going to Buranulke.

Jonathan held up his glass of vodka. "Now that I'm out of the running I might as well break training. Here's to your health, general, and here's hoping you get to Buranulke, if that's what you really want to do, and win the Game. If we can't get in anyway, it certainly won't hurt our United States

if you succeed.” The hot liquid burned down his throat. He gagged and choked and spilled some of it on the floor.

The general laughed. “You’re not used to our vodka. If I go to Buranulke I should take some along to soften up my opponents, just before the Game.”

8 ♦ ♦ ♦

The buffet dinner was ready when they got down to the reception hall and most of the guests were eating. The ambassador bustled up indignantly and towed the general away and Jonathan again found himself surrounded by strangers. He was astonished at the sumptuousness of the buffet table: borsch, huge masses of caviar in hollowed-out blocks of ice, shashlick, boeuf Strogonoff, chicken Kievsky and a score of other Russian delicacies. Was Communism getting fancy? Looked more like something the old Czarist regime would have put on.

Jonathan filled up his plate and had barely seated himself at a round table full of strangers when he heard a loud banging as if someone were hitting a glass—the Soviet ambassador was standing up.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he said in his almost accentless English.

“You have all met our distinguished guest, General Ivan Belek. So many have expressed a wish to see some of the general’s famous feats of strength that I have persuaded him to satisfy our curiosity. After all,” the ambassador pursed his lips and held his hands palms upward in a gesture he often

used, "this is not a formal diplomatic function, but a spontaneous tribute to the great international Olympic spirit."

Jonathan caught his father's eye across the room, and his father gave him a great big wink.

"Here we have some good strong capitalistic horseshoes." The ambassador started lifting them out of a basket and passing them to a group of waiters.

Jonathan grinned over at his father—quite a trick to "spontaneously" produce a bushel basket of horseshoes in the middle of dinner—sort of thing you always had around the Embassy in case of emergency.

"I'm going to have these passed around so everyone can get a look at them." The ambassador laughed. "Don't try to straighten them out though, they might break."

The waiters passed the horseshoes from table to table. The guests looked at them, turned them over in their hands and some even tried vainly to straighten them out. The general got up and stood looking around the room. He had a broad grin on his face. He towered at least a foot above the little ambassador. The first horseshoe to finish inspection was brought back to the ambassador and he ceremoniously bowed and handed it to the general. The huge Mongol took it delicately in his fingertips and, apparently exerting no effort whatsoever, straightened it out into a bar about fourteen inches long. He smilingly handed it to a waiter who took it back to one of the tables for inspection.

Jonathan took one of the horseshoes from a passing waiter—looked exactly like the ones out at the farm. He grasped a tine in each hand and exerted every atom of strength in his body. The metal left deep red welts on the palms of his hands but the horseshoe did not bend even a hair's breadth. He looked up and saw that the general was smiling at him

across the intervening tables. The general spoke to a waiter who came over and picked up Jonathan's horseshoe and handed it to the general.

The Mongol held it up in Jonathan's direction as if he was toasting him with a glass of wine. He then grasped it in his huge hands. Instead of straightening it out, he pushed the ends together and rolled the horseshoe up into a crude spring. He winked at Jonathan and tossed it to a waiter. "Spring is here," he said.

There was an astonished buzz of conversation all over the room which increased to a roar as the general effortlessly straightened out another horseshoe and then, protecting his hands with a handkerchief, bent it repeatedly back and forth until it broke into two pieces in his hands. He ceremoniously handed one piece to the Russian ambassador and had a waiter deliver the other to Jonathan. The piece was almost too hot to hold.

Jonathan and his father walked down Sixteenth Street to get their car at the Metropolitan Club. The night was hot and ahead of them they could see the brilliantly lighted White House shining through the trees of Lafayette Square. Jonathan told his father of his conversation with the general. He felt his father's fingers grasp his arm.

"That was using your head, Jonathan, might take the heat off. The ambassador told me the general was anxious to take a trip around the United States—wanted to see his old Alma Mater, the Fort Benning Parachute School. Admitted the trip had attractive propaganda possibilities, but he said he was afraid it was impossible. There was some important job the general had to be back home for—not hard to guess what

it is. He is supposed to leave the day after tomorrow, right after he puts a wreath on the Unknown Soldier's tomb." His father walked for a moment in silence. "After what you told him, though, he might stay over a while. That would be the biggest possible break I could have."

His father was silent for a moment as they walked along in the darkness.

"What did you think of the general, Jonathan?"

"The most fantastic animal I've ever seen, and I mean animal. There's something almost inhuman about him, Father. He reminds me of a book I read once, called *Gladiator*, about a man who got superhuman strength through some sort of chemical injection." He reached in his pocket and brought out the broken half horseshoe. "Neither of us could stay in the wrestling ring with him, Father, for twenty seconds." He handed the piece of metal to his father. "If you can get over there first and win the Game, it might take everything that you and all those other two hundred pursuers have to kill General Tunch Belek. If his ancestor, the Ming Bashe, was anything like him, it's easy to see how he killed fifty-six of the khan's soldiers before his horse died."

"And I can also see," said his father dryly, "what happened to his horse. That's going to be the weakness in his game, just as it was his ancestor's. Horses aren't designed to operate long under a three-hundred-pound load."

Jonathan started the car and turned it down the little back alley which brought them out on Pennsylvania Avenue. "It would be interesting," he said, "to know exactly how strong the general is, in comparison, for example, with you."

Jonathan's father shook his head. "He's an awful lot stronger than I am. We can get a lot of information out of

this piece of horseshoe. I'll send it out to the Bureau of Standards tomorrow and let them figure out just how much strength it takes to bend a piece like that."

As they were approaching the red light at the busy Washington Circle intersection, a woman stepped off the street car platform almost into their path. Jonathan slammed the brakes on hard. There was a metallic twang and the car glided slowly out into the swiftly moving circular traffic. Jonathan snatched convulsively at the emergency brake and pulled it back as far as he could. Nothing happened. A second later he felt an unbelievably violent crash as they were hit squarely broadside by a Capital Transit Bus. He felt himself hurled across the front seat on top of his father. The car crashed over on its right side and they landed in a tangled heap against the right-hand front door. His father was underneath. Little shards of glass from the rear window rained all over them. Only one thought came into Jonathan's head—fire. He jerked himself around and shut off the ignition.

After what seemed an hour, the left-hand door above their heads was yanked open and several heads appeared in the opening. Many hands reached in and grasped them and a moment later they were standing in the street. Jonathan looked around. The Washington Circle traffic was piled up behind them like water behind a dam. Horns were blowing and he could hear the whine of approaching police cars in the distance. His father was standing there with a stunned expression on his face staring at his right hand. "It got caught on the outside of the car," he said, "got caught for a moment under it."

Jonathan saw a thin white splinter of bone coming out at an angle from the twisted hand—a compound fracture. His

father tried to move it and grimaced with pain. "I'm not much of a doctor," he muttered, "but I know one thing—this will lay me up for at least two months." He closed his eyes. "When I get well I'll be completely out of training for another two months. Jonathan, get me to a hospital quick."

9 ♦ ♦ ♦

The next day Jonathan was told that it would be he, and not his father, who would fly to Buranulke to play the Terrible Game of Ott. The accident squad had quickly found the cause of the accident. The metal tube which carried the hydraulic fluid to the brakes had been filed down in one spot. The file marks were plainly visible. "Took a smart man to do that," drawled the police captain. "Knew exactly what he was doing. Filed just enough to hold up under ordinary braking, but all set to blow when the brakes were slammed on hard for an emergency. Sure to go bad at the worst possible time."

The next afternoon Jonathan was in the office of General Duke, the commanding officer of Training Area W, thirty miles outside Fort Benning, Georgia.

"I have no idea what you're being trained for, Mr. Burr, but I have urgent orders from no less a person than the secretary of defense to do three things: one, teach you to assemble, disassemble, aim and fire the new atomic howitzer; two, teach you to operate our new scrambler, radio transmitter, receiver; three, to give you an accelerated parachute course."

He looked at Jonathan distastefully. "It should take us at

least two months to pound that much into you so it will stick. So what do they allow me—a month?” He laughed scornfully. “No, a scaly, stinking week.” He glared at Jonathan. “You may be three-quarters dead a week from today, Mr. Burr, but the quarter of you that is alive will know as much about these three things as a quarter of a man can.”

Jonathan felt an instinctive dislike for General Duke. Something told him he was in for one of the most unpleasant weeks of his life. The general was famous for being a martinet, a slave driver. Jonathan could see from his prim little smile and the satisfied way he pursed up his lips that he relished the thought of putting someone through the worst wringer he could think up for a week. He saw that the general was appraising him.

“I assume you recognize you are in for an uncomfortable week, Mr. Burr. We’re going to cut out everything but the essentials, and even some of them.” He looked at a piece of paper on his desk. “I’ve made out a schedule that will utilize every available minute for a week.

“You will be wakened by an orderly every morning at seven. You will wear nothing but a one-piece parachute fatigue uniform, plus shorts, socks and paratroop boots. You will be at the mess hall for breakfast at seven fifteen—sharp.” General Duke emphasized the “sharp.” “You will sit at my table. At every meal we will be joined by the person instructing you that day, so you will absorb training even at meals. For one hour after each meal you will continue your studies with the same expert. At quarter to nine you will start your parachute course, conditioning, exercises, jumps from the low towers, the high towers. On the third and each following day you will make two parachute jumps. A week from tomorrow you will have jumped out of an airplane ten times.”

Jonathan was beginning to feel like a high school freshman. "At twelve sharp, lunch in the mess hall at my table where another expert will be waiting for us. An hour's study after lunch with him and then field work on either the atomic howitzer or the scrambler radio. At five thirty my table in the mess hall for supper with the next expert. An hour's study after supper, then field work until ten o'clock. Ten to ten thirty," the general permitted himself the barest ghost of a smile, "relaxation. Eleven o'clock sharp," again that emphasis on the word sharp, "in bed with the lights out." The general handed him the piece of paper.

"I hear you're tough. You're going to get a chance to show it. That adds up to thirteen and a half hours a day of back-breaking mental and physical work, one and a half hours eating, eight hours sleep and thirty minutes relaxation."

For the first three days Jonathan wanted to kill not only General Duke but his instructors as well. The work with his father had been hop scotch. The first morning at breakfast Lieutenant Brasnahan explained the theory of parachute jumping, the formula for determining where one will land on the ground, the theory of slipping the parachute directionally in the air, when to pull the rip cord on the reserve chute, attaching the static line, the theory of landing in both land and water jumps.

After the study period they spent an hour practicing jumping from a three-foot platform, landing practice, another hour practicing exiting from the door of a dummy airplane fuselage—making a quarter turn so they would be facing to the rear when the parachute banged open—"One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, Geronimo!" They spent another hour jumping from a forty-foot tower with parachute harness fixed to a long cable. It slanted him down

gradually and dropped him into a sawdust bed where he practiced the correct landing technique.

The second day he went through five free parachute releases off the two-hundred-and-fifty-foot tower. He was pulled to the top under his parachute and floated away with the wind. The landing on the soft tanbark was surprisingly easy.

The third day he took his first parachute jump from a flying plane at six hundred feet altitude. Jonathan, tenth in the line of twelve, knew he had never been so frightened. The parachute harness was suffocating him. The heavy pack on his back weighted him down, the unwieldy crash helmet, the reserve chute on his chest, the roaring of the plane's motors and the tinny sounds all around him made him feel things were loose and junky and unsubstantial—the demonic howl of the wind past the open door, and the officer methodically giving the signals, then jumping out himself. Suddenly Jonathan was running down the fuselage at top speed, following the man in front of him, a bare half-second stop at the door to get in position, and out with an almost perfect quarter turn to the rear. A moment of screaming wind, then an explosive bang above him and a violent jerk in his groin—the parachute had opened—forgot to count the numbers. His head jerked back. An involuntary shout came out of his mouth when he saw one of the triangular panels was ripped clean across. Then he remembered it was unimportant, not even supposed to pull your reserve chute unless three panels are blown.

The most startling sensation was the immediate disappearance of wind after the chute had opened—he and the wind were traveling together. Other parachutes were all around him, men swaying gently under the white canopies. He

grasped the shrouds on the right side and pulled. Immediately the chute skidded in that direction—started falling faster. He felt the side wind on his face and released the shrouds. The ground was rushing up now to meet him. A second later he hit—much harder than landing off of the tower—much.

Before his second jump he remembered that hard landing of the first and he had to force himself out the door. The third jump was the hardest. After that it was routine.

The atomic howitzer was not even a gun. It was a heavy steel ladder fifty feet high. The rungs did not go straight across, they were half circles. The shell was a rocket with grooves that fitted into each side of the ladder like an elevator going up a shaft. It was really an enormous World War II bazooka. Its rocket blast was spent before the rocket left the end of the ladder so it was aimed perfectly by the guides for the remainder of its free flight—a ballistic missile. The ladder was mounted on a trailer and could be aimed with great accuracy with the same indirect fire system Jonathan had learned in ROTC freshman year at Yale.

After positioning the projectile at the bottom of the ladder, they backed off over a hundred yards with a coil of wire to set the charge off electrically. Jonathan found out why. He was absolutely stunned by the violence of the blast when he touched the button. A howling volcano of brilliant white fire smashed against the ground from the rear of the rocket and bounced high into the sky. For a moment the rocket seemed to be stuck at the bottom of the slide. Then in a twinkling it vanished. Jonathan started running toward the ladder. Fifty feet away the ground was so hot he had to stop. It was ten minutes before they could get close enough to wheel up another rocket.

That night after supper they studied the light atomic warhead on the nose of the rocket. Jonathan learned to assemble both it and the proximity fuse that set it off.

The scrambler-transmitter was a tiny transistor radio sending and receiving set about the size of a book. It scrambled up the human voice so that it was intelligible only to its sister set. Jonathan worked until he could disassemble and assemble it blindfolded. The instructor would hurl the tiny set against the wall and time Jonathan with his stop watch while he fixed it with a repair kit no larger than a cigarette package.

10 ♦ ♦ ♦

It was nine o'clock at night and Jonathan and his father were standing on the unloading apron at the Washington Airport staring at the huge bomber. "They get bigger and more beautiful every year," his father said. "There seems to be some connection between streamlining and beauty. There's never been a plane as graceful as this one, but we know the next will be even more beautiful."

Jonathan counted the motors—ten—more power than any ocean liner. He turned to his father. "Someone said it holds five railroad tank cars of gas."

"It takes unbelievable power to push anything along at four times the speed of sound." His father gestured with the splint on his right hand. "Just cooling the wings at that speed takes more refrigeration capacity than a big city ice plant."

An air force lieutenant colonel came up and tapped Jonathan on the shoulder. "We blast off in five minutes, Mr. Burr." He glanced at his watch. "We can get anywhere on the planet in under six hours. If we leave now we'll arrive when the full moon is angled at about forty-five degrees. That's the best slant illumination for your jump landing." He grinned. "Also it will enable us to get back out under fair cover of darkness."

Jonathan turned to find his father staring at him. "Take care of yourself, boy," his father said gruffly. "You mean a helluva lot more to me than I've ever let you know. I was an idiot to let you do this—let things develop to where there was no other solution." He gestured miserably with his bandaged hand and tried to smile. "If anything happens to you, Jonathan, I'll be along in about three months—to try and even the score a bit."

Jonathan had never seen his father so disturbed before. "Sending you off like this, Jonathan, is the most difficult thing I've ever done," he said. "If your mother were around she would shoot me—and I would deserve it."

Jonathan put his arm around his father's shoulders. "You act as if I'd already lost, Dad. I'm going on this trip to win. In a few days you'll be delighted you had the courage to let me go. With the training you've given me, Dad, it's going to be like shooting fish in a bucket."

"You keep that confidence, son; it'll give you a better chance." His father fumbled around in his pocket with his good hand. "Here's something to give you a little extra courage when you need it."

He pressed something into Jonathan's hand. It was a heavy gold identification bracelet. On the back was engraved: JONATHAN T. BURR, BLOOD GROUP A. He turned it over. There, in beautifully executed black enamel at least ten times life size, was a black ant. It was executed with such realism and artistry that the tiny red eyes gleamed malevolently at an imaginary opponent. The whole body stood in an attitude of aggressive determination to exterminate the enemy. The pincers were open, ready to do battle.

Jonathan put it around his left wrist and admired it. The beauty of the contrasting black and gold colors, and some-

thing indomitable that the artist had gotten into the tiny figure, seemed to touch directly on the philosophy of what he was doing, why he was flying halfway around the world to take this terrible risk in the Cyclone Country. It was the most apt and perfect gift he had ever received. For some reason tears came to his eyes. He half turned around so his father could not see them and tried to blink them away—what a jughead at a time like this.

A few minutes later he was strapped in a comfortable seat—no bucket seats in this yacht. They were taxiing out to the runway. All at once the subdued whistling of the jet prop engines turned into a body-shaking scream. Jonathan felt the soft upholstered seat pushing him hard and steadily as if he were being shot out of a cannon. In an incredibly short time they were off the ground and climbing at what he estimated to be at least a thirty degree angle. A few minutes later he heard the engines being throttled—high above the stratosphere, perhaps a hundred thousand feet up, at three or four times the speed of sound.

Jonathan jumped out of the air lock into the bright moonlight and a force of fifty typhoons swept him away, tumbling end over end like a wheat straw. The stars and the sharp black mountains beneath him and the moon and the horizon were merged by his whirling into a dark gray blanket wrapped around his head. He had done it too often to panic. He knew even at that altitude his speed would stabilize at terminal velocity. There. The moon stopped gyrating and he was falling swiftly, feet first, toward the vertical black peaks of Buranulke.

He turned the oxygen up a trifle and scowled inside his tensely inflated altitude suit. His Turkish came to his tongue

now almost as easily as English. "Buranulke," he said, and his voice reverberated inside the rubber envelope, "the Cyclone Country." He knew he had almost twenty miles of free fall before pulling the rip cord. If he pulled now he might float all the way to Siberia. The icy wind howled past him, but he felt snug and warm.

To the north a narrow thread of light wound into the mountains—the moon shining on the Trans-Baikal Railway. It crossed the Dynze Daban Mountains at a mile altitude—his objective, if he was alive after the Game. He was five hundred miles inside Asiatic Russia. He tried to relax but found it impossible—a good way to get banged up in the landing.

He looked down. The mountains were much closer; many miles left though, at least ten more minutes of free fall. His muscles were still tense—must try to loosen up. He deliberately turned his eyes up from the spiked hell into which he was dropping and tried hard to think of something else. He reviewed his training, the queerest a man ever had: horsemanship—in the atomic age, parachute drops at night, archery practice, exercise with a Turkish scimitar—one with a hook on it. Then the judo, and the Asiatic wrestling, and the interminable practice spearing hanging rings from a galloping horse; three hours daily of Turkish, of all languages, the ancient tongue of the steppes—all to prepare him for a strange gamble with a thousand years of tradition. The Terrible Game of Ott—a ghost game from the past now vital to the power politics of the present.

The black peaks were bigger now and sharper, like the teeth of a gigantic shark. No wonder the Russians had never gotten into Buranulke, nothing but vertical shark's teeth thousands of feet high in a rough circle a hundred miles in diameter, an ancient volcano land, thousands of square

miles, a barbaric oasis completely surrounded by the Communist tide and inhabited for centuries by the Buran Mongols, the Sons of the Typhoon, the fiercest fighters in Asia. He glanced down and tightened up again. He closed his eyes.

In their precipice country, where one could hold off hundreds, they had defied Genghis Khan and Tamerlane with as little effort as they now baffled the Red army. There was only one fantastically protected landing field. The Russians had no tanks designed for vertical cliffs, nor war machines that could by-pass millions of closely packed evergreen trees up to twenty feet thick and two hundred feet high.

The black cliffs were slowly rising to meet him—plenty of time yet. One of his father's intelligence intercepts reported that a couple of years ago a whole Russian paratroop division had dropped out of sight in Buranulke without a trace. There had been no signs of struggle under the dense green blanket. Two atomic bombs had gutted little valleys, but the vertical cliffs had diverted the blasts upward like funnels. A few hundred feet away only a shower of pine cones fell as casualties to Russia's mightiest weapons. Helicopters hovering over the treetops to see what had happened fell riddled with bullets.

As Genghis Khan and Tamerlane had waited, because there was nothing else to do, so the baffled U.S.S.R. turned its attention to more immediate things and waited, waited with annoyance for a solution to the paradox that the largest country on earth had a tiny cancer in its huge body, a cancer ten miles from its most vital railroad pass—the one between European and Asiatic Russia. Today, as in centuries past, the tiny country owed its independence to an ancient ritual, the Terrible Game of Ott. It guaranteed that no intruder

would ever leave the little volcano land alive to tell its secrets to the outside world.

The shark's teeth were rushing up now. Jonathan grasped the rip cord. He was here because of his athletic ability, because he had won the decathlon at Yale, because he was the intercollegiate wrestling champion—big and tough and fast. Falling alone through the vast empty sky, he felt anything but tough now—he was really here only because of his father's injured hand.

He reviewed his father's audacious plan—the establishment of the atomic howitzer base to control the Trans-Baikal Railway in case of war—possible only with the cooperation of the natives of Buranulke. History had proved they could not be conquered. They must be persuaded that the Americans were friends, but to them all foreigners were enemies who must play the Game of Ott. You would have to play it and win before you could even discuss the atomic howitzer base.

“It's a game with the same remarkable rules for both sides, the natives and the outsider,” his father had said, his eyes boring into Jonathan's. “Only one outsider has lived to tell about it.” He had pushed the thin folder across the dining room table. “Here is everything our Intelligence research team has dug up, information pieced together mostly from ancient documents and from stories of the few natives of Buranulke who have visited the outside world.”

“The Game of Ott,” Jonathan mused. “In Turkish, *ott* means ‘horse.’ A series of tasks on horseback.” He had smiled at his father. “Why don't they just kill their captives outright and save time?”

His father had shrugged. “They are a strange breed with a strange kind of morality. At least they give a man a chance.” He leaned forward. “If you survive the game, we will have

chance. You will be their hero. Then you may be able to persuade them to give us our base." He sat back and reached for a cigarette. "If you survive, Jonathan," he repeated slowly.

As he plummeted through the air now it all seemed unreal. He glanced down. He sucked in his breath and yanked the rip cord. It sounded like a giant snapping an enormous blanket—a tremendous jerk, then perfect quiet.

He glanced upward. The huge nylon umbrella swaying above him was intact. He checked with his left elbow; the tiny transmitter was still there under his arm, his only contact with the outside world. He looked down.

A bare, mile-high vertical cliff loomed ahead. He saw he was falling in a down draft twenty feet from the polished black surface—ten feet. He touched lightly, like a drop of rain sliding down a window pane. Something smashed against his skull. He seemed to explode in a bright blaze of agony. A cover of darkness enveloped him.

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In the days that followed, the explosion came again and again, but always less painful and at greater intervals. Jonathan was conscious of lying inside a tent, of voices speaking the soft syllables of Turkish and of soft gentle hands that lifted him and ministered to him. Hot liquids were poured down his throat and a fiery brandy that tasted like chestnuts. He moaned and slept and was feverish, and he felt the cool hands wipe his sweating face and stroke lightly over his forehead.

One morning the pain in his head seemed only a remote ache. He opened his eyes and everything suddenly was in focus—the cup held to his mouth, the face above it, the brightly colored silk tent above that. He stared at the face. It was a young woman, bronzed and delicate, with full red lips and high cheekbones and slanted eyes, surprisingly blue. She was aware that his vision had cleared and she murmured a greeting. When he answered her in Turkish she smiled delightedly and rushed away. She returned with an aged man. Beneath his pointed felt hat his face was wrinkled and gray bearded, but he had the same high cheekbones and blue eyes.

Jonathan felt a thrill pass across his back like the brush of a bird's wing. Through the thick sash that wound around the man's waist was a hooked sword exactly like the ones he and his father had practiced with in Washington. On the scabbard was damascened a beautiful figure of a wolf.

The girl pointed to him. "My father, the khan," she explained. "My name is Bebesh." To the old man she said, "The stranger is well. He can speak to us."

That began a series of questions and answers and conversations that grew longer and longer as Jonathan recovered. He spent the days half-reclining on a pile of cushions under the canopy in front of the khan's brightly colored silk tent. Here he was visited by curious tribesmen. Most of them, he noted, were tall and muscular, with Mongolian features and black hair and eyes. They rode their fierce little Prejvalsky's horses with casual, easy grace, and their bearing as they spoke to him was that of proud warriors and huntsmen.

Most of his talks as the days went by were with the charming old khan. From the moment they met there seemed to be an electric affinity between them that Jonathan did not understand. The old boy was always reminding him of his father—the way his mind worked, his sense of humor, the way he moved.

This Asiatic chieftain with his pointed felt hat and brilliant quilted robe, his baggy pants clasped in soft black leather boots, had become almost as close to being a father to him as his own father. He tried to analyze it—the depth of friendship that so quickly developed between them probably stemmed from the fact that outside his father he had never had an older man as a close friend before, had never known the richness of friendship that could exist between a very old and wise man and a young one just starting out in life.

But why was the distinguished old khan, who held the power of life and death over thousands, so deeply interested in him? Perhaps it was because the old man had never had a son, and then, Jonathan thought, one had just dropped out of the night sky, a man from nowhere who belonged to no one.

In their talks they discussed everything: war, government, philosophy, courage and even death. Jonathan was fascinated with the wisdom of this wise old man who had never been beyond the borders of Buranulke, and with his dignity and humor. The khan was intensely curious about the outside world. He questioned Jonathan about every detail of life in America from skyscrapers to television.

“And all this mighty country would be crumbled to dust,” he asked, “by a few great Russian bombs?”

Jonathan nodded. “Unless we become so strong they would not dare attack. That is why,” he urged, “I have come here for your help.” And as he had done before, he explained the need for the atomic howitzer base. But the old khan, as he had done before, seemed to push his explanation aside. Only a sudden shadowing of his eyes and a flicker of grief crossed his face as he looked at his guest. Then he would commence again his questions about American customs.

During the weeks of his convalescence Jonathan had many talks with Bebish, too, and there was one American custom he demonstrated to her. When he took his lips away from her soft red ones, she had said, “But it is good, I like it. Why do my people not know of this?” Then her white teeth gleamed as she laughed mischievously. “If we teach them, they will do it all the time, like the Americans?”

“Not all the time,” Jonathan corrected. “Only when one is . . . fond of a person, only with a person one loves.”

"We do not kiss in Buranulke, but we love." Suddenly her expression sobered. She touched his face with her fingertips and in her eyes he saw the same shadow of grief that had been in the eyes of the khan. Then she turned and ran.

Jonathan had known for some time that the old khan was putting off the inevitable day when he would have to play the Terrible Game. Jonathan had heard the grumbling of the tribesmen and knew that the day could not be far off—the khan could not go beyond a certain point in holding back the old traditions.

Jonathan pretended to be sicker than he was to gain time for getting back his full strength. He would need every bit of it. Each night and every morning he exercised in his tent: fifty push-ups, fifty deep knee bends, running in position for half an hour, practice against an imaginary opponent with his hooked sword and pulling his bow back seventy-five times morning and night to be sure his training was not lost.

Gradually he felt himself getting as hard as flint, and although he shook his head and walked with a limp and looked at those around him with glazed eyes in the daytime, at night he came into his own, like a fierce nocturnal bird of prey. He stared out the door of his tent with an eagle's keenness of vision at the constant lightning that flashed between the peaks of the black mountains above him.

On the last day of the fourth week that Jonathan had been in the Cyclone Country the three of them were sitting under the canopy before the khan's tent. The grassy slope dropped to a flat circular plain about a mile in diameter. The plain was composed of black sand so firmly packed that it looked like a lake of ink dammed in by the bright green of the surrounding mountains.

Jonathan sneezed. The air was full of a strange exotic-

smelling pollen that made his nose itch deliciously. He loved the smells of Buranulke: flower perfumes, saddle leather, ozone from the constant lightning flashes in the mountains, shish kebab cooking on spits and pine wood smoke.

Twenty yards in front of the khan's tent on the edge of the black sand was a huge bronze statue of a mounted figure in full armor. The exhausted horse was staggering and the giant figure was leaning far forward in the saddle as if urging the feeble horse to greater efforts. The sharp spike and the nose piece on the round helmet and the design of the chain mail coat was typical, Jonathan knew, of sixteenth century Turkish armor, but Jonathan already knew who it was.

Around his head in a whirling circle the figure was wielding an enormous hammer of polished brass. The massive gilded head caught the sun's rays in a gleaming halo of fire that contrasted with the ageless green patina of the rest of the statue. It was Tunch Belek Pasha, the Ming Bashe, who had killed fifty-six of the khan's soldiers. So they had really cast the statue after all.

There was something about the indomitable courage and exuberant physical force of the man's figure that contrasted horribly with the condition of the faltering horse that was about to bring him to his death. It was an ageless example of the best that was in a man being defeated by inexorable superior force, by weakness over which he had no control.

At night, when Jonathan was asleep in his black felt tent, he would shake his aching head trying to get the picture out of his mind, but the figure of the great Ming Bashe stayed there in his mind's eye impossible to erase.

Every time Jonathan looked at the famous warrior's statue, an invincible metal-clad fighting machine, he felt a wave of discouragement sweep over him—the tremendous strength

demonstrated by the sweep of the massive hammer, the size and reputation of the man, the greatest athlete in the sixteenth century's most powerful nation, slaughtered in the last stage of the Terrible Game of Ott. Suddenly one day Jonathan realized that he would never leave the Cyclone Country alive.

He stared out over the black sand plain. Hundreds of figures were working there, their white garments highlighted against the blackness of the sand, hammering, sawing, erecting structures. He knew what they were making. He looked at the khan, hoping the wise old eyes had not read the fear that made him sit thoughtfully, like a criminal waiting for execution. They were making preparations for the Terrible Game—his game. Jonathan gazed out over the busy scene. He must save the generous old man the embarrassment of having to tell him his fate.

Jonathan knew he had been well enough the second week. A concussion goes fast one way or the other. The khan himself had contrived the delays after that, ruling he was not yet fit to play the Game of Ott.

Jonathan glanced at Bebesh sitting on an ottoman at her father's feet. Her wide blue eyes were staring at him. She sensed what was in his mind, they knew each other so well now. He looked at her graceful figure and then he was aware that she was signaling to him, lifting her head slightly in the quick "no" sign of the Mongol people.

The old khan looked down at the turquoise stones that hung from the gold ring which clasped her long hair. They were still trembling. "No what, Bebesh?" he asked gently.

She buried her face in her hands. "No, do not say it. I know what you are about to say, Baba."

Before the khan could reply Jonathan spoke—this was it.

"Baba," he said to the old man, "you do not have to say it. I am almost well enough now for your Game of Ott. In fact I am looking forward to it." He smiled. "No one must mistake your generous hospitality for a repudiation of your country's ancient customs. A few more days and I will be ready. I'd like to take a walk today and see how much strength I've gotten back."

Bebesh clutched her father's knees. "But it is not a game, Baba!" she cried. "It is a murder, a contest to see who kills the helpless victim."

His kindly eyes looked at Jonathan. "It is a barbarous custom. The people demand it; they are sure it is the only thing that has saved us, and they may be right. We have always been afraid to have foreigners in Buranulke. One spy could destroy us forever, but we give them a fighting chance—in the Game of Ott."

Bebesh sprang at her father and clasped his arm savagely. "Chance? When did the last visitor survive?"

The khan's voice was barely audible. "The barbarian from across the sea, my great-grandfather, Ott Kestanesi Khan, the terrible ocean pirate, was the last to win." He turned to Jonathan. "He stayed here afterward, the greatest hero of the Buran Mongols, and became our khan. I am the last male of the line. When I die," he pointed to Bebesh, "there will be nothing left of my brave ancestor but that blue-eyed one."

Jonathan looked at Bebesh and then at the khan. "That blue-eyed one is very beautiful," he said—mustn't have the old boy and Bebesh feeling so badly. "Ott Kestanesi Khan means horse chestnut burr in American. We have many of them on our old family home outside Washington. Funny you have them here too."

The khan looked at him. "Never before in the thirty years

since I have reigned as khan have I wanted an outsider to win the Terrible Game. You are not like the others who have come in." He hesitated. "You are very much like us—like me—in your thoughts and in your philosophy and in everything you do." He smiled. "Even in the way you play towla."

Jonathan grinned. The many hours he and the khan had spent at backgammon had been one of their greatest pleasures—queer that it was his father's favorite game too. The many hours that they had spent playing it at home and at the Metropolitan Club had come in handy.

"I can see you are almost well now," continued the khan, "but you must get in the best possible condition. You must eat great quantities of good food like yogurt and shish kebab and take heavy exercise and ride horseback. Get much sleep." He smiled and waved them away. "Take one of my horses today and let Bebeshe show you what we have here."

Jonathan laughed. "Aren't you afraid I might escape?"

"Only a bird could escape from Buranulke," the khan said sadly. "You came like one, but you cannot leave like one. I wish you could."

12 ♦ ♦ ♦

Their mounts were the same breed of Prejvalsky's horse his father had had in Washington. Both his and the one Bebeshe rode had the same wicked eyes and hairbrush mane, the large head and the lionlike tail, the same explosive nervous energy, but there was one important difference. They had been broken more thoroughly. They seemed almost as docile as the horses back home.

Jonathan and Bebeshe started riding clockwise around the black sand plain. The path led back into the dense tangle of blasted tree trunks that started at the edge of the black sand. It wound in through a rough tunnel under gigantic pine trees. Most of them had been shattered by bomb blasts but many of the largest still stood, twenty feet thick and over two hundred feet high, primeval monsters that had been there since the dawn of mankind.

Their horses' hoofs were cushioned on the padding of billions of pine needles, soft as fine oriental rugs, on the forest floor. The clean smell of balsam tickled Jonathan's nostrils and made him want to sneeze.

Something gleamed like gold ahead of them in the vast tangle, and they came to their first cannon. He reined up his

horse in astonishment. It was a brass monster twenty feet long with a black mouth bigger than a basketball. It was lying on a massive wooden sled that held not only its trunnions but its whole length firmly on each side. The sled was resting on a stone platform which was flush with the ground and about forty feet long. He saw the heavy screw arrangement on the back of the sled for elevating and depressing the cannon's muzzle—almost perfect replica of the bronze giant he had seen at the Stamboul Military Museum near St. Sophia in Istanbul, only the walls were much thicker—higher muzzle velocity.

A group of men were working around the bronze piece pulling at ropes and sighting through slender wooden tubes that were fastened to the great wooden sled. A few feet away a fire was burning under a metal framework on which were resting two iron rods with wooden handles. Their ends were red hot. Jonathan stared at the huge cannon. "What in the name of Jehosaphat is this?" he asked.

"I don't know this Jehosaphat you are always referring to," she said, "but this is part of our defense against the outside world."

Jonathan chuckled. "That old muzzle loader against the jet planes of the Russian war machine?" He saw too late he had offended her. She was looking at him coldly.

"That is not an old cannon." She tilted her head and read the inscription on its barrel. "In fact, it was cast last year. We have over a thousand others like it, thank you, Jonathan Bey, and they have done very well against your famous Russian war machine." She brushed her curls back from her face. "This afternoon I will show you the Russian graveyard where we have buried the thousands of soldiers from this

Russian war machine,” she spat out the words, “who have dared attack Buranulke.”

“But how do you aim it?” he protested. “How can you hit anything with it?”

“We don’t try to aim it,” she snapped. “We wait for something to come in front of it and then we fire it. With over a thousand cannon pointing across the plain in every direction, it is impossible for a man or an airplane to be anywhere without looking down the black mouth of at least one loaded cannon. Let me show you.” They handed the reins of their horses to one of the gun crew. She pointed to a slender tube on the left-hand side of the wooden carriage. “Look through that,” she commanded.

Jonathan pressed one eye to the opening and saw that it pointed directly to a huge white spot painted on the cliff, over a mile away, across the plain. He looked up questioningly. “Sighting points,” she said. “You will see how it works.”

Near the cannon was a head-high pyramid of cannon balls the size of basketballs. They appeared to have tightly stretched leather covers, like huge baseballs.

“Stone covered with wet leather,” said Bebesh. “When it dries, very tight.” She took Jonathan’s arm and pulled him back to one side. She turned to one of the men. “Fire the bombard,” she ordered. The man sprang forward, pulled a red hot iron out of the fire and touched it to the tiny opening on top of the cannon. There was a small flash and a hiss. A shower of sparks shot up from the opening. A moment later there was an earth-shaking roar. A yellow flame forty feet long sprang out of the muzzle and every leaf in the woods around them moved spasmodically. Through the flames and smoke Jonathan could see the massive cannon ball sailing across the plain—slow, floating like a balloon. It landed in the

middle of the plain half a mile away. It rebounded in a geyser of black sand, and rolled swiftly along like a huge deadly bowling ball until it vanished into the forest at the opposite edge of the plain.

Bebesh pointed to another tube fixed on a permanent stone pedestal. "The sighting tube," she said.

He looked through it and saw that it was focused on just the point where the ball had disappeared into the forest. Jonathan glanced back. The massive cannon and the sled holding it had slid back over thirty feet on its stone platform.

He heard the squeal of pulleys. Two teams of four horses each were pulling the huge cannon back into position by means of a double pulley system. A man was sitting on the side of the carriage sighting through the tube and giving orders first to one team, then to the other. Five minutes later Jonathan sighted through the tube and saw that it was again pointing toward the same white aiming spot on the cliff—the cannon was aimed again. Two men swabbed out the barrel with a wet ramrod. "To put out sparks that might prefire the next charge," the commander explained. In less than ten minutes the cannon was charged with powder and a simple derrick had picked up another leather covered ball and let it roll down the huge barrel. The iron rod was again red hot in the fire. Bebesh's eyes glowed with pride. "Already we can fire our cannon again."

Jonathan stood staring at the huge bronze tube—while they were loading it a Russian jet could fly over two hundred miles. Might be pretty effective though against ground forces if there were enough of them covering the plain. He tried to recall his ROTC formula for the energy of a moving projectile: half the mass times the velocity squared. He stooped and tried to move one of the balls—at least five hundred

pounds, probably more. He stood thinking—must have been going almost four hundred feet per second. He multiplied in his head—forty million foot-pounds. There wouldn't be much left of even the heaviest tank if one of those granite balls made a direct hit.

A few yards down the path there was another cannon, and then another, and another. Jonathan was astonished to see that many were bigger than the first they had seen. Some were two or three inches in muzzle diameter, made to shoot spherical iron balls. Every third bombard was loaded with hundreds of small balls, grapeshot. As they were riding along Jonathan heard shouts and the sounds of hammering and voices farther back in the woods.

"What's back there?" he asked.

"Our second defense line, the fire throwers."

They turned back on a little path and then he saw it, a structure of wooden logs two feet in diameter which held up each end of a massive horizontal shaft. Sticking out of the middle of the shaft at right angles was a tremendous iron hook. Swinging below the hook on four iron chains he saw a wooden raft loaded high with heavy slabs of granite—must weigh at least twenty tons. On the opposite side of the shaft from the hook, a wooden arm reached straight up thirty feet into the sky. It had what looked like a three-foot diameter wooden salad bowl on the end.

Jonathan recognized the machine instantly from the illustrations in his school edition of Foissart—a stone thrower, a medieval trebuchet. He remembered how it worked—the wooden arm was pulled down by pulleys, thus lifting the twenty-ton weight on the other side a foot or two in the air. If a projectile was put in the wooden salad bowl and the rope released, the falling weight would snap the wooden arm back

into its vertical position and give the projectile a tremendous heave.

"Hurl a fire pot," Bebesh cried. The commander gave an order and the team of six horses was whipped into action. Their force was multiplied ten or twelve times by a pulley system. Slowly the arm came down and the twenty-ton weight went up. When the arms reached the horizontal the commander fastened it in position with an iron pin. An earthenware pot as big as a ten-gallon gasoline can was hoisted into the salad bowl and the big wick at the top of its narrow neck was lit. As it flared up with a smoky yellow flame, a man with a sledge hammer knocked out the iron pin and released the horizontal arm. The twenty-ton weight snapped the arm up to its vertical position with tremendous force and the smoking pot sailed up high over the trees. A few seconds later a brilliant geyser of flame erupted a third of the way out on the black sand plain. Jonathan was surprised at the size of the flaming area—just as effective as a napalm bomb.

"How do you aim it?" he said.

"We don't," said Bebesh. "It's like the cannon." She pointed to a little crow's nest on top of one of the tallest trees. A tiny figure was perched in the basket. "He has a sight which points to the place the fire pot always lands. If an enemy gets near that spot he blows a horn and the pot is lit and hurled.

"We have many hundreds of these hurling machines," she said proudly. "Each year we cast one more cannon of the latest design and make one more hurling machine—and none is ever allowed to get out of order. Every cannon and hurling machine is tested twice a year."

They started riding clockwise around the black sand plain on the back road of the fire throwers. Jonathan noticed that,

like the cannon on the inside circle, there was another fire thrower every few yards, hundreds of them, each with one or more men in attendance, each with the throwing beam pulled down to the horizontal, with a fire pot all ready to be lit nesting in the bowl at the end.

“Are these crews always here serving the machines?” Jonathan looked back down the forest road. “There must be several thousand men working on these machines this morning. How does your country get any business done? Are they always here?”

Bebesh looked at him seriously. “The main business of Buranulke has always been war—defensive war. Everything else is secondary. But these men are not always here. We call them to stations when we know the Russians are about to attack.”

“They are planning to attack now?”

Bebesh nodded. “Yes, they will attack tomorrow morning at six o’clock.”

“Tomorrow morning! How can you possibly know that, cooped up here in the mountains?”

“We hear the preparations over the radio.”

“Radio!”

“Yes, isn’t it wonderful? We’ve had them and many other nice things ever since the great wreck. It happened right after the big war, the one you call World War II and the one we call Buranulke-Mongol War Seventy-four. The Mongols were moving war supplies from European to Asiatic Russia. There must have been something wrong, maybe carried too heavy a load or something, because one of the railroad bridges in the Dynze Daban Mountains, the Jenghis Han Bridge, collapsed when their train was crossing it. The locomotives and many cars on the bridge dropped into the gorge.

They pulled the rest of the freight train into the gorge after them.”

How beautiful she is, Jonathan thought, when she is excited.

“At the same time, Jonathan Bey, it was horrible but wonderful. More than two hundred and fifty freight cars fell to the bottom of the gorge. My father, the khan, is very intelligent. He ordered out the whole population of Buranulke, every man, woman, child, horse and cart to capture what we could before the Russians discovered the wreck—thousands of people carrying everything on their backs and in carts.” By this time Bebesh was so excited that she reined in her horse. “When the Russian engineers and soldiers arrived a week later, there was nothing left but smoldering embers of what we could not carry away.”

“What did they do?”

“They rebuilt the bridge, made it twice as strong. My father does not think the Russians know of the treasure we got from that train. They think it was all destroyed.” She looked at him and he saw the tears in her lovely green eyes. “It is secrets like that, Jonathan, that make these people carry on the traditions of the Terrible Game. The Mongols must never know what our exact strength is.”

“What did you get from the wreck?”

“Many, many wonderful things. Here, for example, is one.” They were passing another trebuchet. Near it two men were bending over a metal tube that angled up at forty-five degrees. Jonathan could see that it was a three-inch Stokes mortar of World War I vintage. He got off his horse and examined it—an old model but brand spanking new, in beautiful condition. Near it Jonathan saw a generous supply of its ten-pound finned bombs.

"We have fifteen hundred of these tiny cannon," Bebesh said proudly. "We found over a hundred of the freight cars were just filled with these bombs with little wings on them. We have enough flying bombs for two hundred years of war at least."

"Where are they all?" Jonathan asked.

"Five hundred little cannon," said Bebesh, "are guarding mountain passes and narrow valleys in other parts of Buranulke. A thousand are right here near the black sand plain where our greatest danger is. Whenever an attack comes, the tiny cannon are taken to the edge of the field. Their crews aim them at any airplane or group of men that stops anywhere on the field. They can shoot three-quarters of the way across the black sand." She looked at him with pride in her blue eyes. "Our gunners have gotten very accurate. We kill about as many Mongols now with the tiny cannon as we do with our big bombardars."

Jonathan was puzzled. "Why do you concentrate all your defenses on this one field? Aren't there other places the enemy can attack?"

"They can attack," Bebesh said gayly, "but the rest of the country is too easy to defend. It defends itself. We are on a plateau over two hundred feet above the surrounding country, so first before he can hurt us, the enemy must climb a two-hundred-foot granite precipice. If they get to the top, and only a few ever have, we trap them in the woods and in the gorges and shoot them and start avalanches down on them."

"Aren't there any roads or paths into Buranulke?"

"There are only two places where a horseman can enter. It is extremely difficult for him even if we offer no resistance."

Bebesh looked sadly out across the plain. "This black sand desert, though, will some day kill Buranulke. It is the only place where airplanes and helicopters can land. Once a successful landing is made we know we are lost forever. That is why we try to take no chances." She put her hand on his arm and looked at him sadly. "That is also why we play our barbarous Game," she turned her head away from him, "which no outsider ever wins." Jonathan put his hand over hers and tried to change the subject.

"How do you know the Russians will attack tomorrow?"

"There were many radios on the wrecked train. All with directions for the Turkistan troops who were to receive them. There were also electricity sets." She smiled delightedly. "The Russians do not know we have radios and listen to everything they say on the airwaves. They have been talking back and forth for over a week about tomorrow's invasion. It frightens me very much," she admitted. They lapsed into silence as they rode along.

"This sort of middle ages defense was all very well for ten or fifteen years ago," Jonathan said finally, "but why couldn't the Russians just drop an atomic or a hydrogen bomb in the middle of the black sand plain and kill all your defenders with one blast?"

"They have already dropped many," Bebesh said composedly, "and have killed many of our bravest people, also blinded many whom we have had to put in beautiful hospitals up in the mountains." There was a shadow of doubt in her face as she looked at Jonathan. "I can tell you everything, Jonathan, because you will never be leaving Buranulke." She hesitated. "We know very well now how to protect ourselves against atom bombs."

"How?" demanded Jonathan.

“By following the same advice the Mongols are always broadcasting to their own people over their radio. We can’t make atomic bombs, but we have learned to live in spite of them. Look.” She pointed to a trench about eight feet deep next to one of the cannon. “When an atom bomb goes off the crew is safely crouched in that trench. The dangerous light that kills flies over their heads and is lost.”

“But how do they know the bomb is going to explode until it actually goes off?” Jonathan protested. “Then it’s too late.”

“We have many systems,” said Bebesh. “First, we know the Mongols will not spoil the only field they could ever land on. We would gladly trade a thousand warriors’ lives if they would ruin the black sand plain forever so that no airplane could use it. If we knew how, we would destroy it ourselves. If they dropped the atom bomb on the plain itself everything would be poisoned and unusable. For this reason they always set off their atom bombs high in the air. We have special watchers who see them falling long before they explode. Some bombs even come down on parachutes. These watchers warn everyone by blowing cow horn signals. When the cow horns blow all jump into their trenches. There are even special trenches for our horses.”

“But during an attack,” Jonathan said, “they must drop hundreds of ordinary bombs. If everyone jumped in a trench every time an ordinary bomb came down, you wouldn’t have any defenders to work the machines.”

“That’s very easy,” said Bebesh. “They don’t wish their own planes to be destroyed by an atom bomb. When bombs come down out of the sky alone, without any Mongol planes near, our watchers blow our cow horn signals and everyone jumps into his trench. We don’t need any defense unless someone lands on the black sand plain and tries to possess it.”

“But, Bebesh, the Russians have great rockets with atom warheads. They come in much too fast to be seen.”

“But not too fast,” interrupted Bebesh, “for the many radar sets which we captured in our glorious never-to-be-forgotten train wreck. When the screens show something is coming in very fast, we blow the big cow horns and everyone jumps for the trenches and covers his eyes with his fingers.” She was silent for a second. “We also have fifty-three of the little box machines that tell us by clicking when a piece of ground is poisoned. We have special men who carry these machines and mark off dangerous places after every atom bomb explosion with little red flags—red means death in Buranulke—look!” Bebesh’s face suddenly lit up with pleasure. She pointed to the right. “See, here is the graveyard I promised to show you, bodies of men from your famous Russian war machine.”

Jonathan’s eyes followed her gesture and saw, on the edge of the black sand almost directly across the plain from the khans’ colorful tent, row on row of square stone markers, many hundreds. In the center of the plot was a tall flagpole from which hung a large red flag. “Death,” she said. “There will be many more after tomorrow.”

Jonathan could see that about every twentieth marker had a carving on it, and under the carving a name. The carving was always the same, the figure of an archer shooting a bow from the back of a wildly galloping horse—just like the design on his father’s hooked sword. “Why do some have carvings?” he asked.

Bebesh looked at him soberly. “Those were captured and died later in the Terrible Game.”

That night Jonathan and the old khan played towla. “You

call this game backgammon,” the khan laughed. “What a queer name for towla.”

“And I was just thinking that towla was a queer name for backgammon,” laughed Jonathan. He told the khan what he and Bebesh had seen.

“I’m sorry,” said the old man, “that you didn’t see the serpentine factory where we make the fire powder for the bombards, the Greek fire factory and the cannon ball factory where we carve the balls out of granite and cover them with leather.”

“Why the leather?” asked Jonathan.

“It prevents the powder gas from escaping around the ball. It means we can use much less powder.”

“It would be easier and cheaper to use wadding,” said Jonathan.

The khan looked puzzled and Jonathan explained how a mass of cotton or cloth wadding between the powder and the ball would expand to make a gas-tight seal.

The old khan was fascinated. “We will talk about it after the battle tomorrow, if we are alive. It looks most interesting.”

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The battle started at six A. M. by Jonathan's watch. It started with the screaming of a thousand banshees, scores of light jet bombers with hammer and sickle emblems on their wings streaking by at treetop level dropping bombs around the periphery of the black sand plain. Jonathan and Bebesh were crouched in a trench near one of the bombards. They were almost a quarter of the way around the plain from the khan's tent.

After every shattering impact Jonathan cringed into the soft earth as storms of steel splinters howled over their heads. The sound of trees and branches crashing to the ground continued long after each wave had passed.

All at once Jonathan heard a tremendous crash—much too close. A shower of dirt and tree limbs and bark rained down, half burying them, and an earthquake convulsed the ground. Jonathan felt a surge of panic—fear of suffocation, of being buried alive. He sprang to his feet and a curtain of chips and rubbish cascaded down over his face. He reached down blindly and pulled at Bebesh. She was half buried under a mass of branches and debris. He was struggling to get her out when he realized that magically around him there was

utter silence. He scrambled out of the trench. The scene was one of nightmarish confusion. Trees were shattered, broken off, piled up and sprawled in every direction. One, three feet in diameter, had fallen right across the middle of their bombard. He saw the reason now for the massive oak sled that cradled the heavy piece—despite the tree's enormous weight, it was uninjured. A tangle of fallen trees also blocked the front of the cannon, shutting out their view of the plain. "This gun is *bazuk*—finished," said he. "Can't even shoot it, much less aim it. Let's go down to the next one, see if we can help."

"The rest are just as bad, this always happens." Bebesch grasped his arm. "Look." The cannoneer was fishing in the scattered fire for the red hot iron. He found it and touched it to the powder hole. Again there was the hiss and the shower of sparks and the forty-foot flame stabbed out of the muzzle. With a body-shaking roar the huge bombard recoiled backward from under the heavy tree. Simultaneously there was a splitting crash. The hurtling leather-covered ball converted two of the trees that had fallen below it into showers of flying splinters.

The crew reloaded without bothering to aim, and fired again. After three shots the bombard again had a cleared opening out onto the plain.

All around Jonathan could hear the thunderous roar of cannon, the crashing of wood and the whistling of millions of splinters as the huge bombards cleared themselves for action—bulldozers, Buranulke style.

Slowly he became aware of a different noise, slowly getting louder—propeller aircraft. Jonathan looked up through the leaves at the sky. A stately parade of successive echelons of large cargo planes was coming in at an altitude of a

thousand feet. The air around them was sprouting thousands of white blossoms of silk—paratroopers, thousands and thousands and thousands of them. “This is the end,” said Jonathan. He felt defeated and let down—like reading a magnificent novel only to come to an ugly little twisted ending—after all his preparations, after all the magnificent defenses the little country had put up—Russia would win after all.

“There never have been so many paratroopers before,” admitted Bebish.

As they looked, more planes discharged more hundreds of paratroopers, and suddenly a deep drum in the distance beat three times, then waited a moment, and beat three more times. Almost instantly there was a vicious whipping sound in the forest behind them and hundreds of similar sounds all around the periphery of the plain.

“The signal for the fire pots,” she said.

Yellow bursts of flame sprouted all over the plain. The air was crisscrossed with flying fire pots trailing long streams of black smoke. The Russian paratroopers were frantically skidding their chutes in every direction to avoid landing in the blazing pools. Jonathan could hear them shouting and yelling at each other in the air. Many were colliding and tangling hundreds of feet above the ground. Jonathan saw a tangled struggling mass of three paratroopers, their chutes collapsed, fall into the center of a blazing pool of yellow flame. He could hear them screaming and fighting in the flames trying to free themselves of their blazing parachutes and tangled harnesses. They struggled for a few seconds and then lay silent and burning in the yellow flames.

Jonathan heard the sharp clanging of a distant bell. Soon on all sides there was a crashing in the forest—the mortar

teams were running out to set up their pieces on the edge of the sand. Their finned shells were already arranged in neat piles behind the foot-thick balustrades that protected each crew.

The constant booming of cannon, although there were as yet no targets on the ground, showed many were still attempting to blast clear of their blocking tree trunks. Jonathan felt Bebesh clutching his arm. He looked up to see a heavy tank tumble out the back of a cargo plane over a thousand feet up. It had run out through the open rear hatch of the plane under its own power, and its treads were still revolving as it fell sickeningly through the air. It dropped with increasing velocity for over two hundred feet before a gigantic green parachute banged open above it. It hung there magically supported and gently swaying seven hundred feet above the plain.

For some reason, Jonathan thought, despite the bombing, most of the trebuchets must be intact. The air was still full of flying fire pots trailing their black smoke markers. Their tracks were now crisscrossed all over the sky. He gazed over the plain. There were hundreds of scattered fires now, but the open spaces between them were still larger, still plenty of places for the attackers to stand, but still the deadly rain of fire pots came down.

The first “sticks” of paratroopers were beginning to land. Jonathan decided they looked extremely well trained. They landed gracefully, collapsing sideways on the sand in the accepted manner, and quickly disengaged from their parachutes. They carried collapsible carbines and Jonathan could see ugly, efficient looking potato-masher grenades hanging from their shoulder harnesses.

The first group of fifty landed within a few seconds and

collected into an aggressive, bristly-looking group. A mortar shell exploded among them and they broke and scattered. Jonathan saw three bodies lying motionless on the ground. A fourth was attempting to get up. The follow-up shell scattered the dead bodies—the wounded man was motionless now.

In the next sixty seconds hundreds of paratroopers landed. They threw themselves on their bellies and started sniping at anything that moved in the woods.

The ten-pound Stokes mortar shells were exploding among them but paratroopers were now landing many times faster than they could be killed.

The first tank landed right in the middle of a flaming pool of Greek fire. It exploded almost immediately in a cascade of gasoline and oil flames. Jonathan felt the blast of heat on his face. The hatch flew open and a brightly burning figure scrambled out and collapsed motionless on the ground, still burning—couldn't blow up that fast unless it had an air-cooled engine, must have sucked the flames into its air intake. A column of thick oily smoke started rising from the wreckage, smelled like burning rags.

He heard Bebeshe's cry and looked up. Several hundred feet above them at least forty tanks were swaying under their huge green parachutes. He had never seen the bottom of a tank before, looked a bit like an automobile.

The bombard to the right of them roared and Jonathan saw its massive granite ball plow clumsily through a group of paratroopers. It appeared to be moving slowly, like a dream cannon ball, but everything it touched seemed to disintegrate: arms, legs, helmets, weapons and scraps of uniforms flew in every direction—a slow, irresistible force hitting many movable objects. The ball kept itself up just long

enough to strike the sand near another group. A geyser of black sand shot into the air and drifted away with the wind. Although the ball hit no one, Jonathan could see many of the group were writhing on the ground, others had hands over their faces, many were running.

“Flying sand,” said Bebish, “almost as dangerous as the ball itself, can blind you.”

The rain of fire pots from the trebuchets was now a steady downpour. Each pot, almost the size of an automobile gas tank, its wick burning as it lobbed through the air, broke as it landed with a sound like breaking crockery. Almost immediately there was a yellow volcano of smoky flame which covered about three hundred square feet and kept burning for half an hour.

The mortars had gone through their first bracketing and were beginning to zero on their targets with deadly effect. Jonathan estimated the enemy’s casualties in the high hundreds, but still more hundreds of silk umbrellas blossomed in the sky, five at least for every one killed.

The tanks were banging down on the field now—came down surprisingly hard. The first landed and swiveled its turret around like a huge intelligent monster looking eagerly for a target. It started firing at the bombard flashes on the edge of the plain. The sharp ripping crack of its high-explosive shells contrasted with the soft rumbling roar of the ancient bombards. A fifty-caliber machine gun on its turret started chattering like a huge typewriter. A shell howled over their heads and Jonathan threw himself behind an earthwork and pulled Bebish after him. There was a deafening explosion behind them and a chorus of cries.

The tank’s turret swiveled again and Jonathan could clearly see the muzzle flashes of the heavy cannon as it

sought out its targets. As he watched, a massive granite ball lobbed across the field—slow motion again—looked as if it was straining to keep itself afloat. It smashed into the tank just under the swiveling turret. Its fine alloy steel rang like a huge unearthly bell. The cannon and its mount sheared off the body of the tank and fell with a crash into the sand, the gun bent double like a hairpin, pointed grotesquely up at the sky. All movement stopped. The crew must have been killed by the impact—forty million foot-pounds—scratch one tank. The forty remaining tanks landed almost simultaneously all over the field. Immediately the bombards started thundering—huge floating granite balls, two feet in diameter, lobbing clumsily across the plain in every direction.

“No place is safe for them,” cried Bebesch.

A fire pot smashed squarely against the body of one tank and covered it with flaming oil. A few seconds later the hatch flew open and the crew scrambled out and started shoveling sand on the fire. A mortar bracketed them and they fell on their faces, fingers clawing the ground.

The air seemed actually crowded now with descending paratroopers—the Ruskies were really going all out. Masses of hundreds of attackers were beginning to form in regular skirmisher lines. Their tommy guns blazed at everything that moved. They were steadily advancing toward the edge of the plain. Mortar shells were exploding among them and every few seconds Jonathan saw an invisible scythe sweep a whistling path through the mass of men, grapeshot from the bombards.

Defending riflemen were shooting from the edge of the plain now—not mass fire, careful sharpshooting, like Morgan’s riflemen in the American Revolution, one bullet one man—and still the fire pots were raining down, each pot

further restricting the area in which the descending paratroopers could maneuver.

Jonathan looked up. A flight of gliders cut loose from their locomotive plane and gracefully circled the field, looking like a beautiful lazy flock of swans. They landed and immediately somersaulted end over end, shedding wings, wheels and occupants, lovely grace one moment, broken match boxes, tumbled rag dolls the next. Jonathan could see the faint outline of the hidden covered trenches that had tripped them. The defenders had been doing a lot of good thinking—and working.

He was delighted to see the havoc the bombards were wreaking among the tanks. Over twenty had already been destroyed by direct hits from the massive granite balls, but at least a hundred more were swaying down from the sky under their bright green parachutes. The tanks were doing their best to close quickly with the defenders in the woods, before they could be destroyed. As soon as they landed and disengaged from their parachutes their exhausts roared and they charged pell mell for the edge of the plain. Their cannons belched fire and the fifty-caliber machine guns on top of their turrets chattered like enormous riveters.

While Jonathan was watching, a charging tank plunged into a hidden deadfall and completely disappeared from sight. A few seconds later a group of shaken and confused soldiers climbed laboriously out of the hole. They stared hopelessly around—different training than the paratroopers, helpless without their roaring machines, kill the machines and the men die by themselves.

He saw another tank charging toward them at full speed. Its cannon seemed to be shooting right at them. Almost at the edge of the plain it hit a land mine. There was an earth-

quake roar. For a second it silenced all the other noises of battle. The sixty-ton monster was blown twenty feet into the air. It crashed to earth upside down and lay stunned, burning fiercely.

A group of five tanks charging in a parallel line hurtled through the false top of a hidden trench and crashed with sickening impact into the other side. The stop was almost instantaneous, like autos hitting a brick wall, must have seriously injured everyone inside. The treads of two of them continued to spin with no human hand to halt them. They dug themselves deeper and deeper into the trench until only their hind ends were sticking almost vertically upward.

Jonathan saw that the identical thing had happened to at least twenty-five other tanks. That hidden trench must circle the plain about a hundred feet out from the woods.

Jonathan suddenly realized that the tank operators did not appear to know that the bombards in the woods could not be aimed. They invariably charged straight for the woods. This gave the bombard crews an approaching, head-on, practically stationary target. If they came in on a forty-five degree diagonal, Jonathan thought, very few would be hit, might even negotiate the hidden trench safely if they hit it at a sharp angle. This one secret could destroy Buranulke if it ever got out. Maybe the Terrible Game of Ott really had saved the brave little country by keeping such information from leaking to the outside world.

Jonathan stood up and looked around. The field was strewn from one end to the other with smashed tanks and with dead and wounded paratroopers, but it was no use—thousands more were floating down out of the sky. Jonathan saw a massed group of fifty paratroopers running toward him shooting their tommy guns. He sprawled on the ground be-

side Bebesh with ricochets whining all around them. Suddenly he heard a twang—sounded as if someone had plucked the middle string of a giant's harp. Instantly a flight of oversized arrows—must be a hundred at least—flew in a dense clump out of the woods, obviously propelled by a single machine of some kind, like a flight of ducks. They plowed through the advancing paratroopers, hissing through the air in a cone over thirty feet wide, like the pellets of a shotgun cartridge. Over twenty men fell to the ground, dead and wounded. The rest scattered and fled. Jonathan heard a team of horses back in the woods cranking the machine up again, must be one of those medieval catapults that shot bundles of arrows.

Then, he noticed a noise he had not heard before. Thousands of massed rifle shots—must have been well aimed—men were dropping all over the plain where no mortar shells were falling—the grapeshot had an entirely different sound—like a swarm of jet-propelled bumble bees two feet long.

Jonathan was dumfounded by the grandeur and power of the Russian attack, and by the magnificent unorthodox nature of the strange medieval defenses. Effective as the defense was, he could see it was failing. Waves of hundreds of paratroopers continued to drop and there were more thousands of formidably armed troops firmly established on the black sand plain. The field was littered with disabled and flaming tanks whose cargoes of exploding shells and gasoline added to the chaos. Jonathan choked convulsively on a whiff of smoke—hope that isn't poison gas. His practiced eye spotted something different among the hundreds of descending umbrellas: field guns and caissons of shells and heavy fifty-caliber machine guns on tripods, each type of weapon with a

different color parachute, and crews for each weapon floating down around them.

Jonathan had never realized what a thousand well trained mortar crews could do. Time after time he saw a field gun land and disappear in a cloud of flames and explosions and flying sand while its crew was still running to set it up, but hundreds more were dropping down out of the sky with supporting tanks and paratroopers.

He looked up and behind him—a new and familiar noise, the unmistakable thump, thump, thump of helicopters. He saw them streaming down the sides of the almost vertical cliffs and thumping around the periphery of the plain. Spherical black objects were dropping from them into the woods. They exploded with high, earsplitting concussions—antipersonnel bombs. Many appeared to be of the butterfly type used in World War II.

“They always do this,” cried Bebesh. “Look!” A stone ball about six inches in diameter hurtled up into the sky with a rope attached to it. It dragged the rope up in front of the whirling rotors of a slowly moving helicopter and a parachute billowed out suspending the stone ball in the air several hundred feet above the ground with the rope twisting below it. The helicopter tried too late to bank away. The blades wound the rope up in a horrible tangle, like a fishnet caught by a motorboat propeller. Suddenly the rotor stopped and the helicopter plummeted into the woods. “Catapult,” said Bebesh. “We have brought down helicopters four hundred paces in the air. We have also mortars, not the tiny ones we captured from the Russians, but big brass ones like the bombardards. We cast them ourselves. They sit on the ground like brass pots. They shoot thousands of grapeshot up into the air, and also parachute stones with hanging ropes.

A helicopter was slowly approaching them, still a hundred yards away. It was dropping black spheres into the woods. Each one landed with an earsplitting explosion. It was barely fifty yards away when a bombard roared under it. The tail end of the wide swarm of screaming grapeshot touched it and the whole machine seemed to disintegrate at once. The two pilots tumbled down like rag dolls through the falling wreckage of their machine.

Jonathan and Bebesh ran back. A man was lying sprawled face down on the pine needles, and then another. The whole bombard crew had been wiped out. Even the teams of horses were dead, killed by the flying splinters of the antipersonnel bombs.

They returned to the edge of the plain. The scene reminded Jonathan of one of Gustave Dore's illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. Hundreds of columns of smoke were rising from the plain, smelled oily and acid, like lemons. The fire pots were still streaking through the air trailing thin streamers of smoke. The green, yellow, blue, white and black mushrooms were still ballooning from airplanes and landing all over the plain, disabled tanks and field guns were everywhere, and always from above the huge distant roaring of the mighty Russian air fleet came down from the sky.

Hundreds of columns of smoke were streaming up from the woods, smelled like burning pine needles. In two places bright flames were leaping high into the air where shells from the tank cannon or bombs had set off storage caches of oil or serpentine. Every few minutes a land mine would detonate on the plain and black sand would rain down on the battlefield in a gentle drizzle.

The few helicopters still left in the air were adding their thump, thump, thump and the earsplitting crash of their

antipersonnel bombs to the dull roar of the bombards and the complex screaming sounds made by the grapeshot.

The sharpshooters in the woods and the hissing bundles of arrows, coned out by the catapults, had so far kept the Russian soldiers back from the edge of the plain, but their groups were getting bigger, impossibly bigger. They were finding safe areas where no grapeshot could touch them, and large masses of men were now inside the range of the mortars, too close. Jonathan knew that once the paratroopers with their tommy guns got in among the defenders they could decimate them and win the battle. Unfortunately, there were now many safe open lanes formerly covered by bombards that had been silenced by the tank cannon and the antipersonnel bombs.

It had been brilliant, the wonderful, ingenious, desperate defense put up by the mighty medieval war machine against the best the modern world could do—a better defense than any he would have dreamed possible—but it was almost over now. In ten minutes, at the most, the pressure of soldiers in the plain would overwhelm the gun crews by sheer mass of numbers.

Jonathan heard a sharp clanging, sounded like someone with a sledge hammer beating a plate of sheet iron. The signal was taken up by another hammer, and then another and another, until it was audible all around the plain. Almost at once from a hundred points at the periphery of the plain delicate fingers of fire started edging out on the black sand, flames that seemed to feed on fuel welling out of the sand. They progressed about as fast as a man could walk, until they were about a hundred feet from the edge of the woods. Then each flame split in two and started progressing parallel to the edge of the plain. “Oil in buried pottery pipes,” said

Bebesh. "Our last hope. If it doesn't win we are finished. Only enough oil in our whole country to keep it burning for two hours."

Soon there was a barrier of fire twenty feet thick and a hundred feet in from the woods completely circling the plain, separating the attackers from the defenders. A light tank landed and attempted to dash through the fiery curtain. It exploded just as it emerged through the smoke on Jonathan's side. A few courageous paratroopers attempted to sprint through the flames and Jonathan saw Bebesh put her hands over her eyes. The smell of burning flesh was added to the smoke and oil and powder scents.

The Russians were trapped inside a mile diameter wall of fire twenty feet thick. The parachutes were still coming down, still dropping men, guns, tanks, ammunition and more men to add to the confusion in the flaming circle. The bombard in back of them roared and the big stone ball plowed through the mass of men in the middle of the plain—must be sending relief gun crews. Within the next half hour Jonathan saw that all the bombards appeared to be in action again, and most of the mortars and trebuchets. New teams of horses had arrived and wagons were crowding in with more leather-covered balls and more fire pots and thousands of mortar shells. Jonathan saw a girl who couldn't have been over eight years old picking her way gravely through the shambles. Cradled in her arms was a bundle of arrows for the catapult.

For over an hour the tremendous effort continued on both sides. The noise of battle grew impossibly louder each minute as both armies saw the end in sight. Jonathan pressed his hands over his ears to ease the pain of the concussions. He pressed himself down behind the balustrade.

A few minutes later he felt someone shaking him. It was

Bebesh. She was pointing excitedly up to the sky. Except for a few hundred paratroopers who were about to land, it was empty. The dull roaring noise had stopped. He could hear thin cheers coming from the woods. The Russians had admitted defeat.

It was only when he saw the rapidity with which the remaining attackers were exterminated in their trap of fire that Jonathan fully recognized the efficiency and deadliness of the medieval war machine, its ability to absorb enormous punishment and still serve out death to its enemies. He stared out over the terrible scene and realized for the first time the magnitude of the gigantic military effort that had been put out by the Russian air force. No one-day operation in World War I or II could have compared with it.

Half an hour later there was nothing but token resistance out on the black sand. Fifteen minutes after that the flames were shut off and Jonathan saw that a tiny group huddled under a ragged white flag were the only ones left alive of what must have been the largest parachute army the world had even seen. A squadron of Mongol cavalry trotted out in their lacquer armor and ceremoniously made them prisoners—the end of the last great battle of the Middle Ages.

“Prisoners—for the Game of Ott,” said Bebesb.



14 ♦ ♦ ♦

After the battle Jonathan joined the thousands of defenders who now swarmed out over the black sand plain staring with wonder at the smashed up tanks, the overturned field guns, the thousands of machine rifles and tommy guns, the hundreds of cases of ammunition, the watches on dead men's wrists, the warm woolen clothes, the jackknives, the acres of fine nylon parachute silk and the miles of nylon parachute cord.

A wild frenzy swept through the defenders. A race of diligence started—who could pile up the most coins and knives and cigarette lighters and weapons and—everything.

And then the bugles blared out the call to assembly, and a majestic figure appeared. It was the khan riding on his Prejvalsky's horse. Magically the hysteria vanished and thousands of men and women and children crowded around him at the center of the field. His towering pointed felt hat and gleaming lacquer armor made him look monstrous in size. His gray beard and high cheek bones and his piercing blue eyes and the glittering hooked sword he held above his head, Jonathan decided, affected the crowd the same way it did him, the god of battles giving judgment after Armageddon.

There was a deep rumble of cheers and then utter silence as the khan started to speak.

"Men and women of the Cyclone Country." He looked around and smiled grimly. "And also children of the Cyclone Country. We have just won a great victory, possibly the hardest fought in our glorious history. Thousands of our men, women and children will never enjoy the fruits of it. Their eyes will never again see the wild beauty of the lightning in the black mountains that surround us. Their ears will not hear the mighty howl of the cyclones, the Burans that scream down through our polished stone valleys. Their faces will not feel the delicious sting of black sand flying on the gale. They will not smell the delicate perfume of soft carpets of pine needles. They have died so that Buranulke can live."

He gazed at the smoking wrecks of the tanks. "Their weapons were mighty and we have captured great treasure, perhaps even greater than the never-to-be-forgotten train wreck. Now, all our soldiers will have repeating firearms and mountains of ammunition and watches and high-velocity bombards that shoot explosive shells. We will have enough metal, iron and copper and aluminum, to last for years; silk and clothing and other things for years, but the battle may not be done." The khan lifted his hooked sword high in the air. "The Russians may return again tomorrow morning, or come in the next hour. No one is dismissed until all Buranulke's defenses are again in readiness.

"Every cannon ball must be found and carted back to its cannon. The powder supplies must be replenished and new fire pots brought up for the trebuchets. The arrows must be found and fitted into the catapults and the parachute rocks with ropes must be untangled from the dead helicopters and replaced in our hurling machines. The land mines must be

replaced. Every man, woman and child must report immediately to his commander for instructions.

“We fought a glorious battle here on this field today, but remember that other battles were fought all over Buranulke. Our message pigeons are still flying in with the reports. The Russians tried to scale our cliffs in seventeen different places—and were beaten back. They landed fifteen thousand paratroopers in one little valley alone. Their bodies now lie cold in death, feasts for the jackals and wolves and the gluttons of the mountains.

“Thousands of attackers stormed the two valleys that lead into Buranulke and thousands have left their bones to whiten forever in the cyclone country.

“The Mongols dropped an atomic bomb into the Dyban valley and killed all our defenders there. They then landed a whole division of paratroops in the valley. We followed the procedures planned for generations for such an emergency. We closed the bottom of the valley with an avalanche and opened the sluice gates of the Sakaria River at the valley’s head. Ten thousand Russians found that even the bravest and strongest soldiers can’t swim in raging torrents of water rushing down between thousands of twenty-foot tree trunks in our primeval forest. Their bodies will never be found.

“I will tolerate no unorganized looting of the fruits of victory. As in the case of the train wreck, all treasures will be gathered here on the black sand plain and divided by me in a way that will best serve the national interest.

“First, everything that can be used in making war belongs to Buranulke. Of the rest, the silk, the clothes, the watches, the pocket knives, first choice will be given to those who have had their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, killed in the

battle. The rest will be divided equally. Ten per cent will be laid aside for the khanate."

By nightfall of the day of the battle the khan's defenses were again strong enough to withstand a full-scale attack. Most of the bombards and trebuchets and catapults were again working and stood loaded and cocked, backstopped by great piles of projectiles.

The khan looked worried. "There is just one dangerous shortage we cannot do anything about," he confided. "Oil. Our storage tanks are low. It will take months to skim enough to fill them up."

"Skim enough?"

"We skim the oil off the surface of our mountain streams."

"Why don't you drill in the ground for it? If it's overflowing into the mountain streams there must be large quantities right near the surface."

"Dig for it?"

"Dig deep holes in the ground." Jonathan explained how oil was obtained in the outside world. "But it would be much easier here," he said. "Let's find out where the oil seeps into the stream and just dig a hole there beside the stream, by hand. The oil must be very near the surface if it seeps up into the water. If you dig a water well it may fill with oil instead of water."

By the next day some seventy-five fifty-caliber machine guns had been added to the defenses at the edge of the plain and three complete field guns had been assembled from broken parts and added to the defenses. Most of the gun crews now carried tommy guns and parachute carbines and wore harnesses from which were festooned potato-masher grenades. There was plenty of ammunition, so everyone was practicing, sounded as if the battle had started again.

The khan smiled grimly. "Our enemies have been extremely generous with us." He looked at Jonathan. "And so have you, my son. Your idea for using the oil and gasoline from the destroyed tanks to replenish our oil reservoirs has saved us months of work, has made me feel safe." The fierce eyes of the old khan gazed over the plain. "I wish they would attack again this afternoon. We should show them how their own weapons feel."

A few days later the khan and Bebesh were sitting with Jonathan in front of the khan's tent. The black sand plain was dotted with laboring figures.

"I proposed to the council of shamans," said the khan, "that we make the first exception in a thousand years and not require you to play the Game of Ott, my son. I pointed out to them that your brilliant idea of digging holes in the ground near the place where the oil leaked into our streams was changing the whole security of our Cyclone Country. It has only been a week," he said, "since the first hole was dug and already we have more oil than we will need for years."

The old khan looked off into space. "I have decided to build three more fire circles under the sand plain and also to use the fire defense in other parts of Buranulke. Also, now that oil is plentiful, we must try to build a trebuchet that can throw a whole hogshhead of oil." He smiled. "You have made it impossible for any country to ever conquer Buranulke." The old man put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "I am very grateful to you, my son."

Jonathan tried to keep the tenseness out of his voice—no time to turn chicken. For some reason life seemed very sweet to him now, perhaps because of the thousands of lives he had seen extinguished in the great battle, bodies blown to smithereens, happiness wrecked, forever destroyed. He tried

to keep the eagerness out of his voice. "What did the shamans decide?" he asked.

"They said," the khan's voice was low, "that no exception could be made. Forcing *everyone* to play the game is not only a measure of security, which is my problem. It has become part of our religion, which the people feel is their problem." He shook his head. "Tomorrow morning the five surviving Russian prisoners must play the game. As soon as you are well enough, you must play it."

Jonathan glanced at Bebeshe. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was firm, too firm. He saw her lips quiver and then the tears rolled down her cheeks. "Don't feel that way, Bebeshe," he said. "I'm going to win the Terrible Game."

She turned around and fled from the tent.

15 ♦ ♦ ♦

Jonathan had never seen a more formidable company. Each of this elite two hundred chosen for athletic ability would soon be straining every nerve to overtake and kill the solitary Russian prisoner. He was a large man, but not unusually so, of sturdy peasant stock with a broad unintelligent face and a flat nose. Jonathan could see by his hands that he was considerably above average strength. Although the game had been explained to him, he did not appear to have any emotions concerning it.

The Mongols stood facing him in a dense double line. Each had, perched on his left arm, a high-peaked Mongolian saddle over the seat of which were crossed the massive bronze stirrups shaped like boot toes and heavier than the saddles themselves.

Like the Russian prisoner, they wore green peaked felt hats and green baggy pants tucked into soft leather boots. Around their waists were long green silk sashes from which hung sharply recurved scimitars. Their cashmere shirts were white, the khan's was royal black and the Russian's, significantly enough, Jonathan thought, blood red. To Jonathan's surprise no one wore his light, efficient lacquer armor. He wondered why.

Each man had a short, thick, laminated horn bow and a painted wooden quiver with seven steel-pointed arrows. The khan was standing next to Jonathan reading the rules of the Game of Ott from a yellow parchment scroll. They were astonishingly similar to those pieced together by the Intelligence research team. His training had been right on the beam.

Besides Jonathan, the khan and Bebeshe, only the khan's honor guard of ten men were mounted on horseback. Jonathan saw that each of the honor guards carried one of the captured tommy guns. The khan handed down the yellow scroll to an equerry and pulled what looked like an American frontier model six-shooter out of the black sash around his waist. Jonathan was struck by the incongruity of the nickel-plated American frontier weapon in the hands of this ancient Mongol lord. The khan sat bolt upright on his horse, his face grave and expressionless under the tall peaked hat. His left hand was resting on the hilt of his hooked sword and his right was pointing the pistol toward the sky.

"The horses are there over the slope," he said. He pointed to two bright red fighting cocks cradled in the arms of their handlers. "I am signaling with this gun," he explained gravely, "then you are running. The two cocks will commence fighting. When one is killed or refuses to fight when breasted against the other, I am shooting again. Then everyone is after you. Only your skill and Besh, the god of luck, will decide how far you will get."

The khan looked down at the prisoner. There was kindness and compassion in his eyes. He was doing a distasteful job because he regarded it as his duty.

"Do you have any questions?" the khan asked. The prisoner's voice had a strange mixture of respect and belligerence.

“Will the game be played fairly according to the rules your majesty has read?”

The khan’s voice was sharp. “To the letter.” He pointed to the ten soldiers of his heavily armed bodyguard. “The slightest infraction of the rules by you or anyone else will cause them to be immediately shot down by the guards.”

The khan cocked his revolver. “Follow the line of crimson flags. Each separate task is marked by a large yellow banner. Only those working on the same task can try to kill you and you them.”

Jonathan knew the rules. He felt a wave of pity for the lonely Russian. For the first time the man’s face was beginning to show he understood that his death was approaching, fast. Jonathan couldn’t help putting himself in the man’s place. You had certain tasks to do. If the pursuers did them faster and caught you, they killed you and that ended the game, and you.

The khan’s gun went off and the cocks were plumped down in the ring face to face. The Russian started running up the slope. He ran heavily but determinedly. The great weight of the saddle and the bronze stirrups and the rest of the equipment did not seem to bother him too much. Jonathan suspected that he couldn’t have gone much faster without them—like a boat, he had a certain hull speed. He looked like a strong healthy animal who had done plenty of rough hard work but not much running. Jonathan started to spur after him, but the khan shouted, “It’s better to watch the cocks fighting. We can always keep ahead of the field with our horses.”

The cocks were large rangy red birds with white ruffs around their necks, considerably bigger than the fighting cocks he had seen in the mains back home. Their wings had

been trimmed at the same slope, though, and their tails and the hackles and rump feathers had been shortened just the way they were back home. Also he could see that their combs had been cropped down close, nothing left dangling to give an opponent a hold.

Their spurs were thin polished points of steel an inch and a half in length. Cock fighting was evidently the same here in Buranulke as in the rest of the world.

The cocks were stringy and muscular looking. Both were extremely aggressive. They drummed their wings and rose vertically into the air and jabbed murderously at each other with their spurs. They landed and circled each other viciously looking for openings.

The Russian was just reaching the top of the hill. He had time for one fearful glance back as he lumbered over the summit. To the right of him Jonathan could see the peak of the khan's tent, its gray wolf banner with the chestnut burr in the corner was just peaking over the hill. The black sand plain was on the other side of the hill down the hundred foot slope.

There was a mighty roar of delight behind him. Jonathan whirled around. The birds were down now, floundering on their sides on the ground, and their handlers were stooping swiftly to snatch them up. The spur of one was caught in the body of the other and had to be untangled. The handler of the wounded bird put his mouth over the opening where the spur had entered and sucked the wound clean. He spat a mouthful of blood out on the green grass, just the way they did back home.

Again the birds drummed vertically into the air and there was another intense shuffle of wings and spurs. Suddenly there was silence. One of the birds staggered around in a

little confused circle and fell to the ground stone dead. He didn't even tremble. The khan's pistol went off with an explosive bark and Jonathan sniffed the strong smell of good old-fashioned black powder as the smoke streamed past his face.

There was a wild animal howl from two hundred throats and the line of Mongols charged up the hill, looked like a pack of wolves.

To Jonathan's surprise, fully half of them threw away their saddles and bows and quivers of arrows and started sprinting after the Russian with only their naked swords.

Jonathan and the khan and Bebesh spurred up the hill just ahead of the yelling Mongols. "Why are they throwing everything away?" shouted Jonathan.

"Because," Bebesh shouted back, "they do not think he is a fast runner. They think they can catch him before he reaches the horses. They do not think they will ever need their saddles."

They galloped over the top of the hill and Jonathan's heart leaped into his throat. The Russian was lumbering along like a dray horse, weighed down by the saddle and stirrups. The unwieldy sword was banging against his legs. He was a bare two hundred yards ahead of them.

As they galloped down the slope to the left of the khan's tent Jonathan looked back and saw the first few pursuers sprinting over the crest of the hill. When they saw how near the Russian was they let out wild yells of delight.

Jonathan knew he would remember that scene forever. The lean, muscular Mongols were bounding down the hill with their glittering hooked swords naked in their hands, their peaked green hats and loose white cashmere shirts made them look much bigger than ordinary men, rangy, long arms and legs, like monstrous spiders. There was something

uninhibited and wild about the way they ran, superb athletes driven on by the bloodlust that showed in their staring eyes and in the savage yells that came from their distorted mouths. He could see now why no one wore armor, speed was everything, the Game had opened up, like American football.

The Russian looked back and, although Jonathan could not see his expression, his whole body reflected the horror of what would happen to him in a few seconds. The rest of the pursuers were streaming over the brow of the hill now. Each one, when he saw how close the Russian was, dropped his saddle and joined in the wild sprint to reach him first.

Two hundred yards to the left of them, clockwise around the plain, Jonathan saw two structures that looked like gibbets, the hanging rings. Less than fifty feet to the left were the wrestlers, at least twenty of them, each standing in individual roped circles about twenty feet across. Their heavy muscular bodies glistened with olive oil—looked as slippery as fish. The smallest must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. They were grumbling and yelling. “They are angry,” said the khan, “because they see now that the prisoner will never get to them.”

The wrestlers were naked except for black leather pants identical to those that he and his father had used in their wrestling training in Washington. They were tied around the waist and below the knee with the same heavy leather thongs.

They spurred ahead of the crowd until they were twenty yards to the right of the Russian. He was laboring badly now. His shirt was wet with perspiration and Jonathan could hear his tortured gasps for breath. Every few steps he glanced fearfully back at the yelling horde that was so swiftly over-

taking him. Suddenly he saw the three of them trotting along. He yelled to them in Turkish.

“Mother of God, save me. Don’t let me be butchered here alone in a foreign land, save me, save me.”

Jonathan instinctively swerved his horse toward him, but he found that Bebesh had already moved in to block him. “Fool,” she hissed, “do him no good, and you would merely lose your own life.”

The nearest pursuer was only twenty yards away now. He was running with huge sprinting strides like a champion half-miler. His glittering sword was stretched out in front of him and every exhaling breath was a scream that sent a shiver up and down Jonathan’s back—terrible way to scare the wits out of his victim. It was certainly succeeding.

When the Mongol was only a few feet away the Russian wheeled around with a despairing cry and flung his heavy saddle, stirrups and all, into his pursuer’s face. He slashed clumsily at him with his sword. Before the Mongol could untangle himself he had received a deep cut on the inside of his lower thigh. He stumbled and fell to the ground and the Russian turned and fled toward the horses. The horses, tethered to a single rope between two stakes a hundred yards apart, were impossibly far away, at least three hundred more yards.

The Russian heard the frenzied pounding of feet close behind him on the sand and wheeled around again. Jonathan saw that in addition to his sword the leading Mongol had a heavy brass-handled knife in his left hand, just the way they had practiced it in Washington. The Russian parried clumsily and tried to ward off his pursuer’s thrust. The attacker’s sword barely missed the Russian’s head, but with a violent jerk, the Mongol snatched it back. The razor-edged hook

caught the Russian with terrible force around the back of his neck. With a despairing cry he stumbled forward and received the Mongol's knife in the middle of his chest.

There was a howl of disappointment and an explosion of oaths from the rest of the pursuing pack. The khan galloped over to see that no one carried his disappointment too far. His voice roared above the din. "Yasha emir!" he cried. He drew his heavy hooked sword and banged the winning Mongol over the back with the flat of it.

Jonathan stared—so that was it. The winner was automatically made one of the peers of the realm. No wonder everyone was such an eager beaver. The smell of the two hundred perspiring bodies packed around them was almost suffocating.

"You get the traditional request, emir," the khan shouted. "What post do you wish? Or is there some woman you desire for a wife?"

The victorious Mongol stepped back from the prostrate body of the Russian. He saluted the khan with his crimson sword. "My request, generous khan, is to be the commandant of the northern precipices."

"From this moment you are," roared the khan. "Commandant, report to your post."

16 ♦ ♦ ♦

A second victim was chosen from the little group of four terrified Russians who had been watching the game from the top of the hill near the khan's tent. He did not look as strong to Jonathan as the first, but he was taller and more rangy, he looked much better coordinated, and his walk was springy and graceful.

To Jonathan's surprise, he threw down his saddle and his bow and arrow. Then he took off his shirt and his conical hat and stripped down to nothing but his green pants and hooked sword. He even kicked off his boots. He grinned and dug his bare toes into the sand. "I have decided to die with my boots off," he said in Turkish. Evidently the Russians had used mostly Mongols from Turkistan for the attack.

The khan's gun went off and the prisoner sprinted up the hill like a football player, a real athlete. He was unlucky, though. The cocks were not evenly matched and the fight was over much more quickly this time. Jonathan galloped to the top of the hill just ahead of the howling mob. He was relieved to see that the Russian was almost halfway to the horses, running like the wind. No one could possibly catch him before he reached them. Jonathan hoped he knew how to ride bareback.

Again the twenty or thirty Mongols in the lead had thrown away everything except their hooked swords. They were just as fast and just as eager as they were the first time, but they would never close the distance. A yowl of disappointment went up as the Russian jumped on a horse. He kicked it with his bare heels and galloped down the line of crimson flags to the corral where the alces were milling around—just as good a rider as he was a runner. There were at least a hundred of them. The corral was a hundred yards square, about the size of a city block. It had a big raised platform in its center on which the umpires were standing with their white signal flags.

Jonathan knew the rules. You couldn't leave the corral until one of the beasts was on the ground. The pursuers could then only attempt to kill you if they had completed the task you yourself had just completed and were in the same stage as you. The pursuers couldn't take a short cut and run across to the corral. They had to get on horses and put themselves in the same stage, eligible to kill and be killed.

The Russian was a magnificent rider, didn't seem to miss the saddle at all. He galloped into the corral full speed, his naked sword in his hand, and took a wild slash at the nearest animal. The huge deer shied back violently, but the sword bit, and a bright streak of red cascaded down its neck. The wound was not fatal and the deer galloped away at top speed. The Russian banged his bare heels into the horse's side and gave chase, but the alce was much faster than his horse. The desperate man tried recklessly to corner it against the side of the corral, but could not get within thirty feet of it, not close enough to score a kill with only a sword.

A minute later the wild rout of pursuing Mongols galloped yelling into the corral, arrows hissing from their bows, in the

same stage. The Russian tumbled from his horse pierced by at least thirty feathered shafts. He staggered to his feet bristling with arrows, but still holding his weapon, and took a brave slash at the leader of the charging pack. The Mongol parried the clumsy blow and let his sword fall back parallel to his horse's body. As he galloped by, its razor-edged hook took the Russian's head cleanly off, and it bounced like a ball on the hard black sand. The headless body stood stock still for a moment and then sprawled at full length, arrows sticking out of it in all directions like a pin cushion.

The third and fourth Russians that played the Terrible Game never even got to the horses. Both were ignominiously killed, almost before they started, by arrows volleyed from the top of the hill by their pursuers.

The fifth Russian kept both his sword and his bow and arrows. He beat his pursuers to the horses with quite a bit to spare and galloped on to the corral. He killed one of the huge deer by shooting all seven arrows at him and rode down the row of crimson flags to where the lances for the hanging rings were sticking up in the ground. He slowed his horse down to a walk and methodically pushed his lance through the ring, like an old woman threading a needle. The wrestlers shouted with delight and showed enormous excitement as he galloped up to them. He threw his reins to a horse-holder.

Jonathan got a good look at him then. He was a well built, athletic man, about his own weight, with blue eyes and blond hair and a stubborn look on his face—looked as though he was determined to survive. The Russian took one fleeting look at his pursuers, still a quarter of a mile away, and picked out the smallest wrestler of the lot. He bounded into his ring.

The wrestler attacked immediately. Jonathan estimated

that he outweighed the Russian by at least sixty pounds. To get through this stage and continue his flight, he had to leave a wrestler unconscious on the ground.

The huge man grabbed the Russian around the waist, spun him half around and applied a full nelson. The Russian's face turned purple and he clawed futilely at the corded arms that were bending his head forward. The wrestler laughed.

"That hold's not fair," shouted Jonathan.

Bebesh had a stricken look on her face as she stared at him. "Every hold is fair," she whispered.

The Russian's blond head suddenly bent forward, like a flower on a broken stalk. Jonathan heard a soft snap and the Russian's body lay lifeless on the ground.

As Jonathan walked his horse back across the hot black sand to his tent a mood of deep depression descended on him. Someone had picked the right name when they called it "The Terrible Game of Ott." There was something far off and romantic about it in Washington, something thrilling and medieval, man tested against man. There was nothing romantic about it here, nothing romantic about the contorted faces and the yelling pursuers, the hacked-up bodies and the slaughter house smell, the bright red arterial blood soaking into the hot sand.

Jonathan rode on in silence. It was the difference, he decided, one always finds between reality and romance. He tried to fight away the blackness of his depression—couldn't afford to let the Mongols see how he felt—must exude confidence and strength. He looked boldly around him. He had learned one thing by watching the Russians get slaughtered. Each one of the two hundred pursuers, frantically trying to win the prize for himself, tried to work out his course of

action by what the victim looked like. How should he try to look?

He closed his eyes for a moment. There was the terrible risk of being caught in the first stage of the game, before he even reached the horses, caught by the fast sprinters who dropped their saddles and everything else but their swords, and tried to catch him by their mad speed in the first stage. The fewer there were of those, the better his chances were. If by some psychologic trick he could cut them down to only one or two, even if they did catch him he might be able to handle them, kill them.

He noticed many curious glances directed at him and spurred his horse to a trot—easy to guess what they were thinking. In the case of the two Russians who looked weakest, it was so obvious they would be caught in the first stage that almost all dropped their saddles and sprinted after them with only their swords or their bows and arrows. When they caught up the Russians didn't have a chance against such a mob.

One thing for sure, it was necessary to look as powerful and fast and strong as possible. The more convinced they were that he would survive the first stage anyway, the fewer would try the sprinting technique and take the chance of being handicapped for the rest of the race without a saddle. He shook his head. One thing he knew: he was going to hang on to his saddle and everything else as long as he could, couldn't get along without them in the hand-to-hand fighting he would run into in the last stages.

He heard a clatter of hoofs behind him. It was Bebesh. He smiled confidently, but saw immediately that it didn't fool her. She put her hand on his arm.

"Don't be discouraged, Jonathan. I have a plan."

“What sort of a plan?”

“You speak Turkish so well . . . the main valley entrance into Buranulke is only ten miles from here. You cannot win the Terrible Game, Jonathan. No one can. Maybe a hundred years ago, when the outside world used horses and swords and still knew something about bows and arrows, it was possible, but not now. You saw what happened today.” Her eyes were full of tears. “You must flee from Buranulke and it *must* be tomorrow night.”

He looked at her in astoinshment. “But I thought that was impossible.”

“Usually it is, but not now. The new captured weapons have not been given out yet. You could take one of those short wicked guns with two handles that sound like a wood-pecker,” her words were tumbling out breathlessly, “and try to break through the frontier guards.” She thought a moment. “If I came with you, I could order the guards in the name of my father to let us out.” Her face had a stricken look. “Of course, I could never return to Buranulke after such a treachery.” She hesitated. “We would have to be together after that.”

Jonathan felt himself breathing faster. It was at least a chance. He obviously had none in the Terrible Game.

“But when we escape,” he said, “it would be into Russia. It is over five hundred miles to the ocean. And what could we do if by some miracle we got to the ocean?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows,” she said. “That is another day. There is no chance at all here in the Terrible Game. You speak Turkish, you are strong,” she smiled, “we could say we were fleeing from another tribe, that you had married me against my father’s consent. We could ask for sanctuary.” It was the first time Jonathan had seen her

blush. "We have a saying in Buranulke, 'all the world loves a lover.'"

Jonathan grinned. "That saying must have been made up by Adam and Eve because we have it too." Immediately his hope started to fade. "But I came here just to play the game," he insisted.

"But you didn't know what the game was," she said. "You didn't come here to commit suicide, did you?"

"No," he admitted slowly. "I expected to win."

The tone of her voice was soft and pleading. "Don't make up your mind now, Jonathan. Think about it, think tonight, and tomorrow. We will decide then."

She spurred her horse to a trot. "Let's not talk about it any more. Let's go for a ride and forget everything we have seen." Her eyes brightened. "I know. You have seen what happens when one loses the Terrible Game. Let's go see what happens when one wins."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's go see the museum of Ott Kestanesi Khan, my great-great-grandfather, the last outsider to win the Terrible Game."

Jonathan laughed and pulled his horse around. "What an odd name, Horse Chestnut Burr. Let's see his tomb, just to prove to me the game can be won."

Bebesh shook her head. "It could then but it can't now, Jonathan. Conditions are different."

They rode back into the hills, over the sweet smelling pine needle carpet, for half an hour. As they rode over a gentle rise on the woodland path, Jonathan drew in his breath. In the clearing ahead was the most beautiful structure he had ever seen. It was a white alabaster square, about fifty feet on a side, surmounted by a graceful, onion-shaped dome,

very much like the one on the Taj Mahal. There were no frou-frous, no gingerbread carvings or decorations—the quintessence of tasteful simplicity. The long-dead khan's flag flew from a bronze pole in front of the entrance. It was a huge brown chestnut burr on a white field.

They tied their horses to the bronze hitching post near the front entrance and went in past the guard. In the middle of the rotunda was a cylindrical altar of green bronze. From a hole in its center sprang a flickering yellow flame about a foot high.

"It burns forever with no human hands touching it," whispered Bebesh. "A type of burning air comes out of the ground under the flame. For over a hundred years it has burned and burned."

Jonathan gazed at the flame. The little country had more oil than Arabia—natural gas oozing right out of the ground. He looked around him. A full-length life-size painting of a man hung on the north wall. Jonathan stared at it and his knees turned to water and his mouth hung slack. Its humorous steely blue eyes flickered in the unsteady light of the flame. The fierce aquiline nose and the full sensuous lips, the half-smile of the mouth and the broad intelligent forehead—his father looked back at him from the picture.

"I don't understand," he stammered. "My father . . . here."

Then he saw the thin white scar across the cheek and the crucifix-hilted sword that had belonged to the Chevalier Bayard and the three-cornered naval hat on the table beside him. There was *one* other: the sea rover, Benjamin Burr.

"My great-great-grandfather," said Bebesh reverently. "The terrible ocean pirate."

“My great-great-uncle,” muttered Jonathan. “The American patriot.”

So he had gotten into Mongolia after all and had won the Terrible Game. What had happened to his five hundred men? What had happened to his swift barkentine, the *Black Ant*? A thousand questions crowded into his mind. How did he win the game? Who did he marry? What happened? Jonathan saw that Bebesh was reading his thoughts.

“It’s all recorded in our perpetual records,” she said.

So that’s why his flag was a big many-spiked chestnut burr, why he took the name Ott Kestanesi Khan—Horse Chestnut Burr. Never lost his sense of humor. What a book could be written on the life of this audacious man who tried to conquer Mongolia with five hundred American sailors. “The terrible ocean pirate.”

Jonathan stared at the portrait and all at once he knew the reason for the mysterious affinity between himself and the present khan—facial resemblances between Bebesh’s father and his father: the eyes, the nose, the shape of the face—must be corresponding mental similarities that bound them together, made them understand each other. He looked at Bebesh and grinned. “In Maryland, where I come from, people would call us ‘kissing cousins.’”

17 ♦ ♦ ♦

Jonathan pulled back the felt flap of his yurt and entered. It was a round tent about fifteen feet in diameter, suspended from a central pole stuck in the ground. Its felt sides provided a quarter of an inch of magnificent insulation—warm at night and cool in the daytime. There was a small opening, where the pole went through the top, for ventilation, and smoky oil lamps were hanging from brackets attached to the central pole. The floor was covered with bright oriental rugs with bold geometric patterns—very much like the Kazaks his father had on the floor at home. Heat came from two large fluted bronze mongols full of red coals. The bed, which Jonathan had found extremely comfortable, consisted of several layers of down-filled comforters folded into a soft sleeping bag right on the floor of the tent.

He shook his head. It was still whirling. Benjamin Burr, how was it possible? How? How could two members of the same family . . . must be some explanation.

Jonathan looked around. It was beginning to feel like home, something warm and friendly about the closely-packed gray felt and the interesting smells. The flickering flames of the lamps made everything, Jonathan thought, look

alive and friendly; not like the stony glare of the electric lights back home. There was a primitiveness about the yurt that appealed to something deep inside him. Way back somewhere his ancestors must have been nomads. For some reason, it was fun being a little too hot on one side and a little bit too cold on the other. Gave his body something to fight against, made it feel more alive.

Jonathan stretched luxuriously and started undressing. Hanging from a rack on the central pole was his hooked sword and the beautiful laminated bow he had brought from the United States. Abruptly his mood changed as they reminded him of the terrible scenes he had just witnessed. He stood stock still. Two memories stuck in his mind: the headless torso of the second Russian, standing upright for a moment in the corral as if wondering what to do next, like a team without a quarterback. The other was the last Russian, a powerful, well-coordinated athlete, in the hands of the wrestler—the soft snap as his head had jerked forward.

Jonathan stared at the ancient weapons. Who could survive such an ordeal? If he could beat the sprinters to the horses and still keep his equipment, which was unlikely, then there was the problem of killing an animal bigger than a moose with a bow while galloping at full speed with two hundred howling devils after him.

The hanging rings did not worry him, but he would be exhausted by that time, anyone would; and immediately there would come the wrestlers, highly skilled at their own brutal type of wrestling, the smallest outweighing him by at least fifty pounds.

Jonathan threw himself on the soft quilts and closed his eyes. He thought of the words of St. Thomas of Kana in the old scroll at the Library of Congress, something about

leaving his bones to whiten in the cyclone country. An involuntary shudder passed over Jonathan's body. Just exactly that was going to happen to him. He would be buried under one of the little stones in the cemetery on the other side of the black sand plain. He would have one of the special stones with the beautiful carving of an archer shooting from a galloping horse to show he had been honorably killed in the game. His grave would have flowers around it though, he was sure. Bebesh would see to that. Tears of self-pity welled up in his eyes and he thought of the good things he had left at home: the son of a wealthy man, the heir of a famous family, with every possibility in life ahead of him, his life at Yale, his prowess as an athlete, the fruitful pleasant years he could look forward to—all forfeit now, all to be extinguished in a few days by a pack of howling barbarians.

Jonathan turned his face to the gray wall of the yurt. What a fool he had been. Why hadn't he stayed in Washington instead of eagerly grabbing the chance to go on this impossible goose chase, a smart aleck with no imagination. He would be smarter next time—but there wouldn't be any next time.

Suddenly he sat up in bed. He had made up his mind. He would flee with Bebesh. They would try to get across five hundred miles of Russia and escape somehow over the open ocean. She had said, ". . . there is some chance, and that's another day." A huge black load seemed lifted off his mind. Suddenly he felt contented and sleepy. There was some chance after all, some chance that his body wouldn't be butchered, his life blood drunk up by the thirsty black sand.

He looked at his wristwatch. It was eleven o'clock. He sat there rigidly looking at the gold identification bracelet on his wrist. The black ant seemed alive in the flickering light

of the yurt lamps. The slightly raised surface of the black enamel glinted and trembled and its open pincers seemed vibrant and eager to close with the enemy. Jonathan stared at it, fascinated. He remembered his father's words. "Yes, we're the warrior ants," he had said, "and I think we always will be." Jonathan remembered how moved he had been as his father had leaned back against the ivy on the wall. "But never forgot the other side of the picture, Jonathan," he had said. "Remember, the warrior's life is always forfeit. He has already been condemned to death by his profession because death is part of his profession."

Jonathan stared at the ant. He had been condemned to death when he was born. If he got killed in the Terrible Game it merely meant the sentence was finally being carried out. That was the difference between the Burr family and the others. He felt his lips tighten into the semblance of a smile. It wasn't so bad when you looked at it that way—like a prisoner who was condemned to be hung but had a chance to survive by fighting the judge and the jury and the opposing counsel. Jonathan lay down and pulled the covers up around his neck. In five minutes he was asleep.

The next morning they had breakfast in front of the khan's tent. They were sitting on ottomans under the awning on the brilliantly colored Kazak rug. Jonathan wrinkled his nose and sniffed. The braziers were giving off delicious cooking odors. The servants were handing them platters of a white salty cheese called beyaz penir and dolmas, little package of meat and spices wrapped up in grape leaves, and shish-kebab, and rice fried with meat and cherries and chestnuts. With every course they had yogurt, stiff and white and creamy, like custard. Jonathan smacked his lips—the medicine of the steppes.

“Some breakfast,” he said. “Back in the United States we would call this a ten-course dinner.”

“It is important that you recover your full strength,” said the khan. “Things like meat and white cheese and eggs and yogurt are the best medicines. They put on only muscle and no fat.” His kindly worried eyes were on Jonathan. “You will need every bit of it, my son.”

From time to time guests would stop and talk for a few minutes, perhaps nibbling at some of the food, and then leave. Jonathan never failed to feel puzzled about his status. He was a prisoner who was soon to be hacked to pieces in front of everyone. For some reason no one thought it strange that he had this close relationship with the khan and Bebesh. He tried to analyze it. It must be that the custom of playing the Terrible Game was so strongly entrenched that it was accepted like death itself. There was no reason to feel hard feelings against someone who was destined to die by ancient law and custom. Everyone he had ever played football against was condemned to die, somewhere, sometime.

In the brilliant light of the morning Jonathan felt purged of all his fears of the night before. He had told Bebesh of his decision to play The Game after all, and his appetite was good. He sat munching a big white piece of beyaz penir, gazing vacantly out over the plain. Directly in front of him about fifty feet away was the four-hundred-year-old bronze statue of the famous Ming Bashe, Tunch Belek Pasha, an astonishingly realistic statue. The artisan had packed his whole dramatic story into the beautifully wrought statue. The huge vigorous warrior, every line showing energy, courage and deadly efficiency, was seated on the exhausted little pony that was soon to die under him. His beautiful steel

mesh armor looked flexible and flowed beautifully over the contours of his muscular body. He was whirling his huge sledge hammer, from which he got his name, around his head. The head of the hammer, at the end of its five-foot handle, had been gilded. It reflected the sun into a semi-circular splash of color on the ground near the horses' feet.

Jonathan was fascinated by the story that the statue told so clearly: in a minute the horse would sink exhausted to the ground and leave the rider at the mercy of his scores of mounted enemies. It was clear that he was so formidable that many of them would die before he did.

"What's that coming in on the other side of the field?" the khan's voice was sharp.

One of the guards squinted across the plain. "Looks like a cavalry troop, sir," he said.

They continued eating in silence. Jonathan noticed that hundreds of Mongols were beginning to stream out of the woods back of the cavalry troop—must have something pretty extraordinary in tow. Jonathan squinted his eyes out over the plain. The commander was riding in his customary place ahead of his troops but to his *right* was another figure—must be someone important enough to outrank him. Jonathan blinked and looked again, a mounted figure *half again as tall as the commander*. The sun glinted from various points on his body and as he got closer Jonathan could see that the figure was completely encased in metal armor.

Jonathan rose slowly to his feet. A conical helmet with a spike on top and a heavy nose piece, and steel mesh armor—the details were clearer now—the enormous size of the man.

Jonathan's mouth opened and he glanced at the khan. He was standing now, too, his hand on the hilt of his sword, his

blue eyes squinting across the plain. "What is this?" he muttered.

Jonathan saw that Bebesh had her hand over her throat in womankind's ancient gesture of protection, her eyes were wide with fear.

People were streaming in from the forest on all sides of the plain now. Jonathan stared. There was something graceful and self-assured about the monstrous figure that struck a chord in his memory. He glanced from the figure to the bronze statue of the medieval Ming Bashe and then back at the figure. He heard the khan draw in his breath sharply. "His spirit," he muttered and drew his sword halfway out of its scabbard.

Every detail of the live and the bronze figures was identical. The same cut of chain mail, the same design of plates at strategic points, the same protection for the back of the neck and the shoulders and the same articulated gauntlets on the hands and, most astonishing of all, in the right hand of each was the same gleaming brass hammer.

Jonathan heard a chorus of clicks back of him, the body-guard getting their tommy guns ready. The khan waved them down. "Wait," he said.

As the cavalcade approached the bronze statue of Tunch Belek the similarity between the two figures was breathtaking. Jonathan saw only one difference: the horse. The live one was of huge size, not built like a percheron but like a race horse. It was completely covered with glittering chain mail that hung down in a curtain almost to its knees.

As they drew abreast of the statue the armored figure whirled his brazen mace around his head in imitation of the statue and raised it in a salute to the lifeless bronze warrior.

A deep, powerful voice thundered out, "Yasha Pasha."

Immediately all doubt left Jonathan's mind. He would know that voice anywhere. It was General Tunch Belek.

The figure advanced within twenty feet of them and stopped, again he raised the huge hammer in salute. "Greetings, mighty khan," the voice rumbled, "and greetings, beautiful lady." A rumble of laughter shook the figure, "And greetings, my American friend, Jonathan Burr." He bowed gracefully and the tremendous horse shied nervously until he was broadside to them. There had never been such a horse since the beginning of the world, Jonathan thought. Must be at least twenty hands high.

"Mighty khan, four hundred and fifty years ago my ancestor the Ming Bashe, Tunch Belek Pasha, rode into your country to gain honor for himself and his sultan by winning the Terrible Game of Ott. He was received graciously by your ancestor, the khan, and in the game killed fifty-six of the khan's soldiers." Tunch Belek wheeled his horse around and pointed his mace at the bronze figure. "He was finally killed only because of the failure of his horse."

Again the brass hammer came up to salute. "I am here, mighty khan, out of respect for your ancient traditions for the same reason my ancestor came to your country." He paused for a moment. "And for the additional one that, after four hundred and fifty years, it is fitting that another member of our family be granted an opportunity to erase that ancient defeat."

The khan was standing stiff and dignified in the way he always stood, Jonathan noticed, when he was acting as the khan and not as an individual.

"We are greatly honored," he said, "by this tribute to our ancient traditions." He hesitated. "For what date shall I set the game?"

Jonathan drew in his breath. General Tunch Belek was looking at him, appraising him.

His answer came almost too quickly. "I would like to eat, sleep, eat, sleep again, and have the game played in the middle of tomorrow morning."

"So be it," said the khan.



18 ♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning at ten o'clock by Jonathan's watch, General Tunch Belek played the Terrible Game of Ott. The khan was reading the rules from his yellow scroll. The two hundred pursuers were massed in their dense double line with their saddles on the ground before them. The red fighting cocks were cradled in their handlers' arms and General Tunch Belek in full armor was standing in front of the khan's horse with his hands on his hips. His giant bow was slung over his shoulder and his quiver bristled with the feathers of at least forty arrows. Jonathan stared at them . . . much thicker than regular arrows, maybe three times as heavy but about the same length. The size of the bow was unbelievable . . . must have had a seven-hundred-pound pull . . . more than most medieval crossbows. The massive hammer was suspended in a leather tube riveted to the armor under his left arm. The gleaming brass head of the hammer was near his shoulder and the handle slanted down at a forty-five degree angle and almost touched the ground behind him.

The khan hesitated. "And no contestant shall have more than seven arrows in his quiver at the start of the game."

Tunch Belek's deep voice rumbled a protest. "Why can't we carry as many as we wish?"

"That has always been the rule, the rule your ancestor fought under."

Tunch Belek reached back angrily and pulled the whole mass of arrows from his quiver. He replaced seven in the quiver and threw the rest on the ground in front of him. He fitted one to his bow, drew it back to his ear, and released it at a forty-five degree angle. Almost instantly the arrow vanished. There was a murmur of exclamations along the line of soldiers.

Tunch Belek picked up another arrow and apparently without aiming, shot it in the direction of the khan's tent. It hissed in a flat trajectory and pierced cleanly through the gray wolf flag on top of the tent pole. Again there was a noise of voices. A respectful noise, Jonathan thought.

Tunch Belek strode over to a saddle lying on the ground and fitted the brass boot-toe stirrups inside each other spoon fashion. He picked up another arrow, pulled it back to his ear and shot it cleanly through both brass stirrups. Jonathan stared—cleanly through four thick layers of cast brass. There was pandemonium along the line of the soldiers now, shouts of incredulity and the kind of wild laughter that betrays uncertainty.

One of the ownerless yellow mongrel dogs that scavenged around the camp fires trotted over the brow of the hill near the khan's tent. Tunch Belek picked up another arrow and carelessly shot it. In the dead silence its hiss sounded like a vicious snake. It hit the dog squarely in the chest, emerged from his rump and continued to fly, disappearing over the brow of the hill. Jonathan looked down the line. This time

there was a dead silence. No one had ever seen anything like that before.

Tunch Belek picked up a bunch of ten arrows and wedged them under the index finger that held his bow. Shooting with incredible speed at a forty-five degree angle, he shot them all over the hill toward the black sand plain. Although they moved too fast to be seen, it was obvious when he stopped that all ten were still flying. Jonathan saw many glum looks along the line as Tunch Belek slung his bow over his shoulder.

"Mighty khan," he said, there was the faintest suggestion of sarcasm in the word "mighty," "I am ready."

Tunch Belek picked up his saddle with its heavy stirrups lightly, as if it was a bracelet on his arm. The khan's gun roared, the cocks were breasted against each other and the general started for the top of the hill. He moved easily in long athletic strides that completely ignored the weight of his armor and the heavy load he was carrying. He bounded over the top of the hill without even deigning to look back and disappeared.

Jonathan noticed that many who had obviously been intending to sprint after him without their saddles, hoping to catch him in the first stage, had changed their minds. They were picking up their saddles. It would take some doing to land the general in the first stage, some dangerous doing.

The cocks seemed to be evenly matched. Jonathan prayed fervently that one of them would fall—wonder how often history had depended on a cock fight—the courage hidden somewhere in a little brain no bigger than a dime.

After what seemed an age, one cock went down. The khan's gun roared and everyone was off. Jonathan spurred

to the top of the hill and saw that Tunch Belek was already halfway to the horses. He was running easily, not tiring himself—looked like a big metal robot out there striding along mechanically in his gleaming armor. His horse was tethered in the middle of the line. Four times Jonathan saw the general stoop swiftly and pick up something and put it in the quiver on his back. Arrows, the ones he had shot from behind the hill. A clever trick—increased his arrows by over half.

Jonathan sensed something different about this race. There was no wild yell as the pack reached the top of the hill. Everyone seemed to realize this was no chase to see who could slaughter a rabbit—more like a pack of dogs after a tiger. Many of the pursuers were going to be killed in the next few minutes—nothing like the presence of death to sober one up. Tunch Belek's astonishing proficiency with the bow plus the whisper that he was not a man at all but the vengeful spirit of his ancestor had eliminated some of the desire for individual action. There was a tendency to stick together in a pack. Just like hunting back home Jonathan decided. When the dogs were chasing a rabbit they strung out all over the landscape, with a mountain lion they worked close together.

Only one man had decided to go it alone. Jonathan recognized him from the other races, an extremely fast runner. He evidently realized that catching Tunch Belek with nothing but a sword was only a quick way of committing suicide. He had eliminated everything but his bow and a quiver of arrows and at the second pistol shot started off like a sprinter doing the four-forty.

Jonathan watched fascinated as the sprinter quickly outdistanced the rest of the pack. He had never seen a faster

runner, even in the Olympics, but Tunch Belek had had too much of a start. Despite his armor and the weight of his saddle and stirrups he was also traveling at great speed. The man was almost a hundred yards behind when Tunch Belek reached his horse.

Without breaking stride the Mongol snatched an arrow from his quiver, notched it to his bow, and, stopping short, aimed swiftly and shot. Jonathan could hear the sharp smack as it hit the chain mail in the middle of Tunch Belek's back. It dropped harmlessly to the sand.

Jonathan suddenly realized that the Mongol could be a real threat to Tunch Belek. He could undoubtedly ride bareback like the rest of his race, and would keep shooting at the general until he dropped one of the deer and got himself into the next stage. It was just possible that he might plunk a lucky arrow somewhere into the Russian, or into the legs of his horse below the armor, and win the fight.

Tunch Belek evidently recognized the danger himself. Suddenly he wheeled, with a swift and graceful motion, and let fly an arrow. The Mongol dodged frantically, but the arrow went cleanly through his midsection and stuck into the sand behind him. The Mongol staggered and broke his stride. He yelled defiance and tried to fit another arrow to his bow, but the arrow must have hit some vital part. After a few steps he stumbled and sprawled face down on the sand.

Tunch Belek tossed the saddle over his huge mount, vaulted easily into it and, to Jonathan's surprise, started off at an easy canter. Must be trying to save his horse. Why doesn't he pour on the coal? Certainly he knew the limitations of his mount. Must assume he was playing it smart. It was invaluable to know that he was afraid of the same thing that defeated his ancestor. Must be some way to use that

knowledge, the knowledge that, magnificent as his horse was, it couldn't carry all that weight at top speed for very long.

They had little trouble keeping up with Tunch Belek. He waved to them and cantered easily into the nearest entrance of the corral. When the animals stampeded he did not increase his own speed at all. He took careful aim from his cantering horse and shot one of the fleeing deer cleanly through the right front shoulder. It tumbled end over end in the sand, kicking and struggling, and the umpires shouted and waved their white flags. He certainly made it look easy.

The general cantered out the far gate of the corral and down the mile-long line of crimson flags to the big yellow banner at the end of the plain. He picked up one of the lances that were sticking up in the sand and cantered back almost another mile toward the hanging rings. Jonathan glanced back. The rest of the field was galloping wildly, catching up fast. Everyone was mounted now and strung out over a quarter of a mile, with at least a half dozen having already killed their animals. Like a steeplechase with everyone wide open—looked as if the general would get to the wrestlers first, but just barely—must take a lot of guts to methodically hold down your horse's speed with something like that gaining on you.

Tunch Belek leveled his lance, stood up in his stirrups and cantered easily down on the hanging rings. Jonathan was sure from his confidence stance that he had practiced as much as he had, would have no trouble here.

Four of the Mongols galloping abreast of each other were almost a quarter of a mile ahead of the pack. They were starting to shoot at Tunch Belek. Just as he reached the hanging rings his tiring horse shied so suddenly that only his great skill as a horseman saved him. He missed the ring by

at least two feet. Jonathan saw why. An arrow was dangling from the chain curtain that fell back over his horse's rump. It had not penetrated the armor but the effect of the impact on the horse was disastrous.

Tunch Belek must have realized that he would be caught by the field before he could return and pierce the ring. He wheeled swiftly, stuck his spear upright in the sand and galloped right back at the four charging Mongols. A hail of arrows glanced off both him and his horse. He charged through the hail, his horse for the first time at full gallop, and shot four times with incredible swiftness. Jonathan could see he was aiming at the horses rather than the men. Two horses fell mortally wounded on the sand and the other two became completely unmanageable. The general's hammer was out now, and as he galloped by one of the fallen horses Jonathan saw the rider struggling to extricate himself. The general swung his hammer in a swift, gleaming arc. It smashed the Mongol savagely across the chest.

Jonathan could clearly hear the crunch as the massive weapon crashed through bone and tissue—would have killed an elephant. Tunch Belek wheeled again, and swung low on the side of his horse. He snatched the remaining arrows out of the Mongol's quiver and thrust them in his own. He recovered his spear and bringing his unwieldy horse to full gallop, thrust it cleanly through the nearest ring. As the lance clattered to the ground Tunch Belek reached back and added the arrow that was dangling in his horse's chain mail to the growing supply in his quiver—already had more than he started with.

Jonathan looked back. The pack was only a couple of hundred yards behind now. They were screaming and yell-

ing for the first time. Their morale must have returned, God knows why after what they had seen.

Tunch Belek threw the reins to a horse-holder. Without a glance around he sprang into the nearest wrestler's rope circle—no attempt to figure out which looked the easiest, no attempt to be subtle or fancy. He closed with his opponent immediately. The wrestler looked small in comparison, but Jonathan knew he must have weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds. The armored figure whisked his opponent viciously around, lifted him off the ground in an airplane whirl and hurled him to the ground with appalling force. He piled up on his shoulder and the side of his head and lay moaning—must have at least a broken shoulder, possibly a broken neck.

Tunch Belek did not even look at him as he vaulted on his horse and galloped down the line of crimson flags to the edge of the plain. It was obvious now to Jonathan that the stop had been too short to help much. The big horse was tiring badly. In a few seconds Tunch Belek was over the edge and out of sight in the dense woods.

"No one is allowed to follow him down there except the contestants," said the khan. "We had to make that rule when we found that half the population of Buranulke would hide down in the woods before the game with every weapon under the sun and get into the game. Now it's death for anyone to be caught in the woods the day of the game." Jonathan looked back. The wrestlers were putting up a courageous resistance but everyone was taking them on in relays. They were wearing them out fast. In a few minutes the whole field was again in full cry after the general.

The khan spurred across the plain. "If the Russian can stay alive a few minutes longer they will come out over there

by the stone tower," he said. Jonathan estimated it was about a mile and a half away. He could plainly hear shouts and the clash of weapons in the woods—some of the dogs must have caught up with the tiger.

As they galloped across the plain to the stone tower Jonathan could see there were still a few contestants milling around in the corral and the hanging rings. A sizeable group was also still piled up around the wrestlers. Jonathan turned his head. About forty-five men had gone over the hill into the woods. He looked back at the bodies strewn over the plain. They would eventually get Tunch Belek all right but, like his ancestor, he would be remembered for a long time.

They had been waiting at the stone tower only a few minutes when there was a bright gleam of metal and Tunch Belek labored over the rise at the edge of the plain. He was progressing at a painful, slow canter. His quiver was still bristling with arrows and he was firing with deadly effect back down the slope. Jonathan heard yells of pain.

A few seconds later the first pursuers appeared. Their horses were faster than Tunch Belek's. The general was shooting with great deliberation and skill, aiming only at the horses. His own horse, the magnificent black, seemed to know instinctively that somehow he had to get all that mass of metal back to the khan's tent. He cantered doggedly and exhaustedly in a straight line, doing nothing to disturb the general's aim.

Jonathan saw that the pursuers had exhausted their arrows and had been straggled into a thin line by the narrow forest path. The general must have been keeping them away from him by the simple expedient of killing every man who got to the head of the line. Jonathan counted only fifteen pur-

suers, and then they stopped coming. The twenty-five others must be dead or horseless in the woods.

The pursuers immediately fanned out on the plain and the front two attacked simultaneously with their swords, one on each side. Tunch Belek shot one through the shoulder and, swinging around backhand with the full five-foot length of his hammer, swept the second completely off his horse. The hammer was hanging by a leather thong around his right wrist. It was massive and unwieldy but did not prevent his using his bow.

Tunch Belek shot his last arrows into the two nearest horses and hurled his now useless bow back into the startled face of a third. He was halfway across the plain now and Jonathan could see under the nose piece of his helmet that his lips were set in a grim line. The hooked swords of his pursuers were at best three feet long. The five-foot handle of the brass hammer plus the extra length of the general's right arm made him a formidable antagonist.

Time after time the Mongols attacked him from both sides simultaneously but their deadly slashes bounced harmlessly off his high-proof armor. One pursuer circled around and attacked him from the front in an attempt to slow him down, but the sight of the tall column of metal on the monstrous metal-clad horse bearing down on him was too much. The Mongol's mount shied violently and the general cantered on.

A minute later the general lumbered past the last yellow banner. Jonathan sat on his horse numb with surprise. The general had won the Terrible Game of Ott—the first time it had been won since 1816.

"Yasha emir." It was the khan's voice. He rode up with drawn sword and banged the general across the back with

the flat of it—sounded like someone hitting a pile of tenpenny nails with a board.

“You have the traditional request, emir, any reasonable request that does not act to diminish the khan’s authority. What is it?”

“My request is that Jonathan Burr be required to play the Terrible Game tomorrow morning and that I be one of his pursuers.”

“But,” said the khan quietly, “Jonathan Burr has not recovered his health enough to play the Terrible Game.”

The general’s tone was respectful but firm. “That, sir, is my wish.”

The khan made another attempt. “You are throwing away your chance for an important command. Jonathan Bey will have to play the game anyway in a few days.”

“I will get the other wish and the important command tomorrow, your majesty,” Tunch Belek said, “when I have the honor of killing Jonathan Burr in the Terrible Game.”



19... ♦ ♦ ♦

After lunch Jonathan was pacing back and forth in his tent. His nerves were still trembling from the events of the morning. He looked out through the open flap onto the plain. Teams of horses were cleaning up the mess, the dead bodies of animals and men that had been gloriously alive a few hours before.

The tent darkened. Bebesh was standing in the entrance. It was obvious she had been crying. "We must flee, Jonathan, tonight without fail. There can be no argument possible now." She put her hand on his arm. "The Terrible Game was almost impossible yesterday. Tomorrow with Tunch Belek himself one of the pursuers, there is absolutely no hope. Look," she held out her hand, "I have made out the passes for the border." She was breathless. "We may succeed and we may not, but at least there is a chance. I can't bear to think of your being butchered tomorrow morning." She pulled him around. "Please, please, please, Jonathan, don't argue with me. Just stop thinking and come. We can go for our usual afternoon ride together, and just not come back."

Jonathan looked past her through the opening of the tent and out across the black sand plain. She was right, of course.

There was absolutely no chance left now. He saw her blue eyes staring at him. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but she didn't. He could see she was waiting for him to speak. Jonathan let his eyes wander. His senses seemed to be unusually acute, the green beauty of the hills beyond the plain, the delicate flowerlike smell of the perfume she always used, the smell of campfire smoke, and food cooking, the smell of saddle leather and the fine oil on the weapons. He stared into the dull red coals in the brazier. Life looked beautiful and smelled beautiful—was beautiful. Who would benefit by his throwing away the precious gift of his life?

Jonathan closed his eyes for a moment. Again, clearly as in a movie, he saw the scene he could not drive from his mind: the Mongol soldier struggling to extricate himself from his fallen horse, his despairing look as the whirling brass hammer crashed into his chest.

A team of four horses came into view dragging something. It was the carcass of another horse, cleaning up the field for tomorrow's new crop.

Bebesh was reading his mind. "What good will your death do your country?" Her voice was urgent. "And if he kills you he will get even another grant. He may pick an important defensive post and open our country up to the barbarians. If we flee he will not have this grant."

Jonathan looked up. "But if I'm not here to play the Game he will not have gotten his first grant. Then he could ask for the important post anyway." Suddenly Jonathan knew that he had to stay and play the Terrible Game. Let the god of battles decide which country would benefit from the prowess of its champion, like David and Goliath.

He glanced down at the black ant on his wrist.

"What is that?" she asked sharply. "You are always looking at it. Is that your god?"

"No," said Jonathan, slowly, "it's not my god. It's my sense of pride in myself and in my family." His father's words came back to him and he looked at her with new confidence. Suddenly a great load came off his shoulders. "You see," he said, "my life is already forfeit, lost. If I win the Game tomorrow it will be wonderfully and unexpectedly given back to me. If I lose, I lose nothing that has not already been lost."

"But I don't understand," she cried. "You are standing there in front of me, alive. If you flee from the Game you will still be alive. If you stay," she turned and gestured toward the plain, "you will be one of those carcasses being dragged away to be buried."

All doubt had left his mind now. "Now that Tunch Belek has won, I am my country's only faint chance," he said. "My life cannot be weighed in the balance at all. Now Tunch Belek is your greatest hero, and he deserves to be. He is intelligent and resourceful, a great man in his own country. Here he will get constantly stronger and more influential, and your father, the khan, is old. Tomorrow morning one of us will be eliminated, either Tunch Belek or I. My country is entitled to the very tiny chance that it could be Tunch Belek."

Bebesh opened her mouth to protest but he held up his hand. "Please, there is no time now to argue. My mind is made up. I have to do many things tonight. You've got to help me." Jonathan lifted the quiver off its hook on the central tent pole. He selected an arrow.

"The blade of this point is too broad to penetrate the chain of Tunch Belek's armor. It needs a different point, long and thin and strong like a needle, one that will slip between the

links of chain, one without any barbs, just a quarter the diameter of the arrow shaft itself, a sharp needle five inches long gradually increasing to the size of the shaft. Can your father's armorer fix all these for me before tomorrow morning?"

She snatched the quiver from his hand and started out the door.

"The new points must not weigh more than these, or the arrows will fly differently," he said. "There won't be time for me to practice with the new points." She was running across the sand to her father's tent. "Come back as soon as you can," he shouted after her. "There is something else."

Jonathan had never seen a more formidable company. Funny how much fiercer and deadlier they looked when you were the rabbit yourself. Each of these elite two hundred chosen for his athletic ability would soon be straining every nerve to overtake and butcher him. Jonathan gazed down the dense double line. Each man carried on his left arm his high-peaked Mongolian saddle. Over the seat of it were crossed the massive bronze stirrups shaped like boot toes, heavier than the saddle itself. He certainly had improved on that system. Better not to give it way until the last possible moment.

They wore green peaked felt hats like his own and green baggy pants tucked into soft black leather boots, all except Tunch Belek.

Around their waists were long green silk sashes from which hung sharply curved scimitars. Their cashmere shirts were white and his own significantly enough, he thought, after what he had seen, was blood red. Each man had his short

thick laminated horn bow and a painted wooden quiver with seven steel-pointed arrows.

Directly in front of him in the position of honor in the middle of the double line, stood General Tunch Belek. He towered a full head over the others and the sharp spike on the top of his steel helmet jutted half a head above that. The gleaming chain mesh that covered him from head to foot was, Jonathan knew, the finest ultramodern alloy steel. The terrible blows Tunch Belek had received the morning before had left only thin score marks on the high-proof metal. The massive hammer was suspended from its leather tube under his left arm. Its bronze head gleamed brightly and its handle slanted back at forty-five degrees almost to the ground. Tunch Belek's enormous hands were curved in their articulated steel gauntlets like eagles' claws. Jonathan could see his anticipatory smile in the shadow under the steel nose-piece of the helmet.

"We have reached the point of no return, Jonathan Burr, you and I. It's a long way from our dinner party at the Russian Embassy in Washington to this land in the sky." The smile broadened. "That was play-acting and laughing and bending horseshoes and plotting and planning. Our next half hour, Jonathan Burr, will not be play-acting. It will decide which of our countries will control the most valuable piece of land on our planet." A deep rumbling laugh shook the mailed figure. "I am very confident."

Jonathan saw the khan coming down the hill with Bebeshe.

"Why, general, did the Russians attack Buranulke the other day?" he asked.

Again he heard the rumbling laugh. "There is no reason not to tell you, now that death is staring into your eyes.

"We found out you had tricked us and were in Buranulke,

knew we had to act swiftly. It was decided at highest level that I would make a conventional attack with our parachute army. If that failed I was to stake my own life in the Terrible Game.”

The rumbling laugh had a note of respect in it. “Our intelligence service has studied you well, Jonathan Burr, and your father. For hundreds of years two great families on opposite sides of the planet have held to a military tradition, yours and mine. The great god of battles has nurtured our families, breeding them, refining them—for a reason.” The mailed arm gestured toward the two handlers with their fighting cocks. “Just like these people breed their fighting birds. He knew hundreds of years ago what the breeding was for.” The Mongol paused. “It was all for this very moment, Jonathan Burr, a moment predestined by the god of battles.” The mailed figure moved and the rays of the rising sun brought the great brass hammer to golden life.

“We are the fighting cocks of the god of battles, the best in the East and the best in the West. He has invited his friends to come and see the match.” The mailed fist gestured towards the sky and Jonathan looked up. “The gods are looking down at us from the far reaches of the heavens. They have staked the fate of two great nations on us, made history turn on our skill at this ancient Game.”

Jonathan felt a ripple of goose flesh run up and down his back. It was preposterous, but he had a feeling that vast beings were staring down on them from the depths of the open sky. He brought himself back to reality with an effort. No time to get caught up in such fantasies now. He smiled at Tunch Belek. “Do you think the victory has been predestined also?”

“Of course not,” the Russian laughed, “or the gods wouldn’t

be watching. One only watches a cockfight because one doesn't know who will win." The giant hesitated. "There is no question you will be killed, Jonathan Burr. I am worried only by one thing: the fear that, by chance, someone else may snatch the prize which is rightfully mine—your life."

Jonathan took an arrow out of his quiver and held it up before the general. Its gleaming point was barbless. Its five-inch length tapered gradually down from the diameter of its shaft to a needle point. The armorer had outdone himself. "You have cheated," he said matter-of-factly, "in the use of modern alloy steel armor. Might as well use a tommy gun. But these deadly needles will even pierce through the mesh of your alloy steel armor." Jonathan grinned. It was nice to see the thick lips curve down at the corners.

"That's not a conventional arrow."

"Nor is your armor made of conventional metal." Jonathan saw that the general was staring at the arrow's needle point. That hit him between the wind and the water, best to pour it on thick. "I'll tell you another secret, too, general. The needle tips are poisoned . . . with a germ culture. The slightest scratch and you will die horribly." The general slowly lifted off his helmet and glared at him.

"Let me see that arrow."

"Nothing shows," said Jonathan, "nor can it be washed off. Why don't you make a complaint that it is poisoned and then try to prove it?" he taunted. "Or why don't you complain about the needle point and then I will complain about your armor." The general stared at him silently.

"One thing I know," said Jonathan. "I may be killed this morning but you will never live to enjoy the fruits of my death."

The khan and Bebesh came up and the khan started read-

ing the rules from the yellow scroll. It was almost a duplicate of the morning before. When he got to the place where only seven arrows were allowed Jonathan interrupted.

"Mighty khan," he said, "yesterday General Tunch Belek was disappointed at the limitation on arrows. I agree with him and suggest that everyone be allowed to carry twenty arrows instead of seven."

The general shook his head. "I would prefer that no one carry any arrows, or," he amended, "that they can carry any number of arrows they wish but be allowed to shoot them only at the deer, not at other contestants."

Jonathan answered quickly. He knew his greatest danger came from arrows volleyed from the rear. If he could outlaw the bow completely it would be more like a steeplechase—might have a chance. "I agree to that. No one should have any arrows except to use in the corral."

One of the soldiers shouted a protest. "The arrow is a traditional part of the Terrible Game," he cried. "It cannot be eliminated without everyone's consent." The khan lifted his hand for silence.

"Unless a change is unanimously agreed, every man can carry the traditional seven arrows."

Jonathan swore softly to himself. He had given himself away, did not want to meet Tunch Belek's eye. He finally turned and saw the general grinning at him. "So your arrows aren't poisoned after all," he laughed. "You came very close to getting me out of the race."

Jonathan took the arrows out of his quiver. He replaced seven and looked at the flag fluttering on top of the khan's tent. Time to use a little psychology here himself. By sighting the day before he had found that an arrow shot at the khan's flag would fall directly into the path which he would take

to the horses. Besides, if he hit the flag it would put the fear of God into the fast runners. He took careful aim. Not much harder than his father's targets back home.

The first arrow went cleanly through the flag. There were general cheers along the line. Jonathan methodically shot ten arrows. Seven went through the flag and three barely missed it. It was, he knew from the silence along the line, an impressive display. And the ten arrows would be sticking in the sand waiting for him on the other side of the hill. Two could play at that game.

Jonathan stooped down and picked up his saddle. He adjusted its new harness around his shoulders. It fitted comfortably and except for his bow left his hands entirely free. Could run much faster that way. The peaked saddle rode high and protected the back of his neck.

"Very clever," rumbled the general, "should give you much more speed in the first stage."

The khan's gun roared and Jonathan found himself sprinting up the slope. His exercises, the deep knee bends, the hundreds of push-ups in his tent every morning and night and the long lonely evening runs on the black sand plain had paid off. He felt light and springy and packed with energy—stronger than he ever had before in his life. He would need it all.

He glanced back at the brilliant fighting cocks. They were rising vertically and drumming at each other furiously. Hoarse shouts were coming from the packed line. For some reason a vision of the little white Maryland church near his home flashed into his mind. He prayed that the birds were evenly matched and courageous. Seemed funny to be praying to God about a cockfight. Those steel spurs—one lucky jab and two hundred men would start after him.

He glanced back at the top of the hill. One cock was down. It struggled up again. Thank God for the courage in that tiny head.

The khan's silk tent was on his right as he coasted down the grassy slope. His own dark felt one was just beyond it. He could plainly see the brilliant geometric Kazak rug under the canopy, the one where most of their conversations had taken place. He was delighted at the lightness of the saddle now that the harness distributed its weight evenly. He had tried running with it over his arm the night before and had been seriously disturbed at the way it slowed him up. He wished now that he had tied the scimitar on top of his saddle. It kept swinging between his legs and tripping him. Might need it quickly, though.

The jousting rings were on the sand to his left, hanging from their scaffolds at the height of a horseman's lance, larger than those in Washington. He could spear one with his eyes closed, if he lived that long.

He glanced to his left, the wrestlers. For the first time his confidence fell—at least twenty of them, each standing in his roped circle. Their muscular bodies glistened with slippery olive oil—like trying to land a conger eel. He saw that the smallest was on the far end. Even he must weigh two hundred and fifty pounds.

As he passed them, the nearest one laughed. "Faster, faster, my son, please don't die before you reach us."

Jonathan was a hundred yards beyond the wrestlers when the second shot came. He tried not to panic. Surprising how hard it was to keep steady. Picking up the arrows helped. All ten of them within ten yards of each other, sticking up in the black sand. He thrust them in his quiver and methodically counted out one hundred steps. He glanced back. The

whole slope around the khan's tent was white with pursuing figures.

Again he counted a hundred steps. His pursuers were streaming over the plain behind him now. One, he noticed, was way out ahead and gaining rapidly. He had dropped everything except his horn bow and a quiver of arrows. The Mongol was trying to catch him, kill him before he reached the horses half a mile away. Jonathan increased his speed for a few seconds and glanced back. It was impossible. If he stopped to fight the mob would catch him, if he didn't, a razor-bladed arrow in some vital part of his body.

Jonathan felt a vicious blow in the middle of his back under where the saddle was harnessed. He thanked God for the lacquered armor back piece Bebesh had found for him, a life saver, and not heavy enough to slow him down. He craned his neck around without slackening pace. The arrow was still sticking in the lacquer. He snatched it out and added it to the seventeen in his quiver. His closest pursuer was only sixty yards away now. He heard a sharp hiss. Another arrow had barely missed his head, almost ended the race right there.

Jonathan nocked an arrow to his bow and whirled swiftly. It shot out in a flat hissing trajectory, its steel point flashing in the sun. It barely missed the green peaked hat of his pursuer.

The Mongol was only forty yards away when Jonathan's second arrow pierced his right shoulder. He pitched forward with a yell onto the black sand and dropped his bow. He grabbed the shaft with his hands and pulled it out. When Jonathan glanced back a moment later he was sitting disconsolately on the sand, his head in his hands.

Jonathan was sprinting now at top speed. The horses were

seventy yards ahead. As in the previous races, their reins were tied to the heavy rope which was stretched tightly between the two massive wooden pillars a hundred yards apart. He glanced back. His strategy, shooting at the flag, had worked all right, put the fear of God into the fast runners. All the rest of his pursuers were loaded down with the same equipment he was carrying. The front of the pack was well over a hundred yards behind.

A good twenty yards ahead of the rest was Tunch Belek. He was striding along mechanically, like a steel statue. There was something especially frightening about the way the Russian was pursuing him. The rest of the mob was straining and yelling. There was something close to panic in his recognition of the silent confidence with which the Russian was running, an implacable unhurried pursuit with only one objective—his death.

An occasional arrow hissed by and once again he felt a sharp whack on his back, and knew he had again been saved by his lacquered back armor.

Choosing the right horse was vital. Tunch Belek's gigantic mount was tethered almost in the middle of the thick cable. It stood at least a foot higher than the horses around it. Jonathan slammed his saddle down on the huge horse's back and found the two openings in the armored chain curtain. It took only a moment to cinch it. Arrows were whistling all around him now. The instant he mounted they stopped. With scrupulous fairness the pursuers observed the rules. Neither the hunted nor the hunters were permissible targets unless they were in the same stage of the Game of Ott. Jonathan knew, though, that in a few seconds at least fifty other horsemen would be mounted and after him at different speeds. If he tried to gallop away from the fast ones his horse would

tire, and the slower ones would get him. If he just galloped away, he had no chance. He would surely be killed before finishing the next stage, the corral.

Jonathan snatched out his scimitar and slashed through the middle of the heavy tether rope. The two ends fell to the sand with a swish and the line of horses milled around uncertainly. He shouted at the top of his voice and jabbed his blade into the rump of the nearest horse. It kicked at him viciously and reared back with a piercing whinny. Jonathan banged it over the back with the flat of his sword and it stampeded.

He yelled again and charged violently at the horse on the other side. Instantly a thundering stampede of terrified horses was galloping in every direction. Their reins were still knotted to the severed sections of the tether rope so the kicking, bucking, screaming horses were jerked in every direction by their conflicting courses. They revolved in a mad scramble around the two pillars with the heavy tether ropes whipping over the plain like deadly serpents throwing showers of black sand into the air.

Jonathan galloped to the nearest pillar and by severing the rope with his scimitar completely freed half the horses. He wheeled, galloped a hundred yards through the middle of his now almost hysterical pursuers and slashed through the other rope freeing the rest. He wheeled again and spurred toward the corral. He passed within ten feet of Tunch Belek and saw just in time that the brass hammer was out of its leather tube. Jonathan jerked his horse around and dodged. He heard the whistle of the massive brass weapon over his head. Even over the tumult he heard the roar of rage from the khan. "Foul! If you had hit him, general, we would have shot you down."

With an involuntary cry of triumph Jonathan galloped down the line of crimson guide flags toward the corral a mile away. He had gambled that Tunch Belek's huge horse, free of the weight he usually carried, would have swiftness and stamina, and he shouted out loud as he felt the power of the magnificent animal between his knees and felt the wind whipping against his face. The killing fatigue of the first stage was already forgotten in a wild surge of confidence. The crescendo of confusion behind him was like a barbaric song in his ears. He looked back. His pursuers were struggling like madmen among the kicking, stampeding horses. The deadly tether ropes, whipped in every direction by the frenzied animals, were hurling men flat on their faces and breaking arms and legs and heads as the pursuers attempted to get mounted.

The corral was on the edge of the black sand, a fenced square the size of a city block. Milling around in it, apprehensive because of the events of the morning before, was the herd of moose-like alces. The umpires stood expectantly on their platform in their center.

As he approached, Jonathan nocked an arrow. Must stay in the corral until an animal was on the ground. As he galloped through the entrance the elk stampeded. He pursued one across the enclosure and took careful aim. The needle-pointed arrow entered just above the shoulder. The terrified animal only increased its speed. Jonathan spurred after it and pumped in three more arrows. Taking the blade off made them more deadly for Tunch Belek, but much less deadly for the alces. Just punched a hole, no hemorrhage. He pumped in four more arrows but the huge animal continued to run. Jonathan looked back. Many of his pursuers were mounted now, galloping after him. He nocked another

arrow, took careful aim and shot it into the side of the animal's head. That blew out some fuses. The elk stopped and finally, with exasperating slowness, it fell. An umpire yelled and waved his flag.

Jonathan cursed. Eight arrows left and most of his time advantage lost. Suddenly he heard a crash. An elk fleeing ahead of him tumbled end over end. An arrow was sticking from its neck. An umpire yelled and waved his flag, and as Jonathan galloped through the far gate, he turned to see a lone horseman galloping into the corral—covered with chain mail. It was Tunch Belek. A long, impossible shot had paid off. Jonathan looked back again in a swift double-take. The general looked ridiculously large on his tiny native pony but another riderless horse was galloping beside him. Its reins were tied to the pommel of his saddle—a spare.

Jonathan spurred grimly down the line of crimson guide flags to the great yellow banner half a mile away. He gave his horse its head, had never traveled so fast on horseback before. Stuck into the ground under the banner was the clump of steel-tipped lances for the hanging rings. He snatched one without slackening his pace and followed the curving line of guide flags back toward the khan's tent.

The hanging rings were directly ahead, in front of the silk tent. Thousands of spectators, most of the population of Buranulke, were massed on the green slope shouting and waving. And then, in front of the small formation of cavalry horses, Jonathan saw the khan, and beside him, Bebesh. Jonathan glanced back. His delay in the corral had been fatal. Tunch Belek was only a quarter of a mile behind now and he already had his spear. Again they were in the same stage. The rest of the field was hopelessly behind. Some had

reached the corral, but many were still chasing the stampeded horses.

Jonathan lowered his lance and stood in his stirrups, knees bent, to eliminate up and down motion. He cantered toward the middle ring holding his lance at its center of gravity so he could aim precisely by slight movements of his hands. Couldn't take any chance of missing now.

He heard a sharp hiss. An arrow plunged into the sand twenty feet ahead of him. His horse shied so violently that he had to save himself by grabbing at the pommel of the peaked saddle. His lance missed the ring. It took almost a hundred yards to wrestle his frightened horse around. Tunch Belek had learned something.

Both he and Tunch Belek were now galloping at the rings from opposite directions. Luckily he was a hundred yards closer. Jonathan raised his lance. Another arrow flashed by. His horse shied again but less wildly. The next arrow was very close but his horse only quivered. This time his lance went cleanly through the ring. Jonathan spurred toward Tunch Belek. This was it.

Jonathan wheeled and they were galloping side by side. Tunch Belek was on Jonathan's left holding his lance lightly, standing in his stirrups aiming at the ring. His spare pony was galloping on the other side of him. Jonathan, ten feet away, had his horn bow pushed out at arm's length. The needle-pointed arrow was pulled to his ear, pointed at Tunch Belek's side. They were in different stages and Jonathan knew he could not release the arrow until the ring was speared.

A hush fell over the crowd as everyone realized that the instant Tunch Belek speared the ring, Jonathan would loose his arrow. In a few seconds one or the other would be dead.

There was no sound but the thunder of hoofs on the sand. Jonathan pointed his arrow at the vulnerable area directly under the general's raised right arm, the chain mesh might be thinner there. If the needle point got through, good night.

At the last moment Tunch Belek lowered his lance and purposely missed the ring. Jonathan roared with laughter—rattle him, enrage him, make him mad.

"You're a coward," Jonathan yelled, "a disgrace to your noble ancestor." Tunch Belek jerked his pony around and yanked the reins of the second horse with the hand in which he held the spear. He was shaking with rage and frustration.

Jonathan galloped ahead to the wrestlers—hurry him, enrage him—have to be cool to spear those rings. Jonathan turned his head and bellowed back at the mailed figure. "I'll see you after the Game, general. When I win, my wish will be to ship you back to Russia." He felt through the arrows in his quiver until he found one of the special ones—perfect time to use it. He aimed at a spot twenty feet over Tunch Belek's head—must be sure not to hit him—and released the arrow. Instantly there was a fearful scream, loud as a locomotive whistle, as loud as his father's whistling arrow back home. The armorer had drilled the tiny hole at just the right angle.

Jonathan's own horse shied and galloped wildly off to one side. He brought him under control and laughed aloud. When the whistling arrow screamed over their heads Tunch Belek's two horses stampeded in opposite directions. Only the Mongol's enormous strength and agility kept him from being unseated. His own horse was pulled back on its haunches but he did not let go the reins of the spare horse. It bucked and reared and was finally thrown heavily on its side. An incredible athlete.

The wrestlers were waiting for Jonathan in their roped circles. Jonathan knew the rules—there weren't any. No hold was barred. Until a wrestler lay unconscious on the ground he could not progress to the next stage. He glanced back—no time. Tunch Belek had gotten his ponies under control but not himself. He'd just missed the ring again. The rest of the field was thundering down on him now, their lances poised for the hanging rings. Many of them wouldn't miss.

Jonathan shot another screaming arrow over the heads of the charging horsemen. As the locomotive whistle howled overhead their horses bolted wildly in every direction. That would gibber things up a bit. He shot another screamer to keep them going.

Jonathan vaulted off his horse and scooped his sweaty hands through the hot black sand as he ran toward the smallest wrestler, the two hundred and fifty pounder at the end of the line.

The huge man crouched down with arms widespread. He had a smile of anticipation on his fleshy face. Jonathan came in fast, his fists clenched. He slid to a stop and pitched a handful of black sand into his astonished opponent's eyes. The wrestler sputtered and made a lightning blind dive for him. At that moment he got the other handful of sand.

Jonathan started his haymaker from his knee. It caught the wrestler, his eyes still screwed tightly shut, directly under the chin. Funny how one knows when a blow is right, can feel its rightness by the shock at the elbow—if it hurts it's right. Jonathan stepped back and his opponent pitched on his face. He didn't even twitch.

Jonathan mounted. Must make the wrestlers mad, make them hold everybody up. He yelled at them, "No wonder forty men got through you yesterday, you haven't even the

strength of women.” He laughed. “Any old lady with a handful of sand can get through this harem of weaklings. You are all planted like cabbages. *Kara kum lahanalar!* Black sand cabbages!” Jonathan shouted at the crowd, “Wait a few minutes and watch the cabbages get rolled over!”

The crowd roared with laughter. Someone started to chant, “*Kara kum lahanalar, kara kum lahanalar.*” As he galloped off the crowd took up the refrain, “*Kara kum lahanalar!*”

He looked back. The wrestlers were scowling and shouting at the laughing crowd and waving their fists and yelling threats. They were scooping up great handfuls of sand and roaring for a chance to vindicate themselves. The next few pursuers were going to get a terrible reception. Nice not to be one of them.

The crimson flags stretched half a mile across the sand and ascended a gentle green slope at the end. It was wonderful to have guessed right. He had been afraid the big horse might be slow and lethargic but his gamble had paid off. He could win now.

Jonathan sniffed. He could smell the green pine needle smell of the forest ahead of him as he galloped up the green slope. He glanced back. All of his pursuers were piled up at the wrestling pits. Not one had gotten through. The boys with the olive oil were howling mad—good for their metabolisms.

Jonathan felt his horse stumble, felt himself hurled forward in the saddle and clung desperately to the chain-covered neck. The top of the hill had dropped off in an almost vertical sixty-foot drop. The huge horse tried desperately to stop but his hoofs slid sickeningly over the sandy surface to the edge and out into thin air. Jonathan felt an endless moment of weightlessness and a backbreaking metallic crash.

He was thrown clear and tumbled to the bottom where he sprawled, breathless and dizzy with shock.

His hand went to his nose, bent to one side, broken. He spit the blood out of his mouth and lifted his head. His magnificent horse lay crumpled and unmoving, dead on the stony bottom. The curtain of steel mesh armor was piled around him in a disorderly mass, like a rumpled bed sheet.

Jonathan stared dazedly up the incline. His pursuers would be on the way. They knew the course. They would slide cautiously to the bottom while he waited on foot, defenseless.

Jonathan felt a twist of sickening fear. He pulled himself painfully to his hands and knees and staggered to his feet. He dropped the hilt of his broken sword and looked bewildered around him for some means of escape. There was none. Running would only delay his death, make it all the more humiliating, slaughtered like a cowardly rabbit in the forest.

It took all the will power he could muster to keep himself rooted to the spot, thinking. He gathered up three unbroken arrows and replaced them in their quiver. The bow appeared to be intact. He tipped his head and listened. He thought he heard the faint and distant sound of his pursuers' horses but his brain seemed fogged and useless with despair. *So this is where it is to be, deep in a jungle gulley in a wild Asiatic country by an arrow or a sword or by the terrible brass hammer, bleeding and alone.* He stared at the luxuriant forest growth on the steep hillside above him. *This is the last thing I shall ever see,* he thought, and suddenly an image of the back garden of his family's house appeared before his eyes. He could see his father's face. "When one is forced to fight for it, life becomes extremely precious," his father had said, "even when it is forfeit. If one of those warrior ants sold his life cheaply he would be denying his heritage. A soldier is

just as valuable as the expense and trouble necessary to kill him."

As if some power beyond himself was manipulating him, he snatched up the hilt of his broken sword. With the three inches of broken blade remaining, he started slashing at the long thin vines festooning the forest floor. He'd make it expensive to kill him. He dragged them across the path and tied them to the trees on either side, trip ropes, as many as possible stretched across, catch the horses' feet, trip them up, tumble them over, dismount the riders. He would be killed, of course, but no one would ever forget the slaughter at the bottom of this hill. He'd sell his life expensively, might even get Tunch Belek, give the U.S. another chance. Jonathan worked with frantic haste, cutting and tying, cutting and tying, cutting and tying—needed time, more time.

"Not strong enough, Jonathan."

He whirled around. It was Bebesh.

"They will break like threads," she panted. She had been running. Her black hair hung loose and tangled to her shoulders. Her chest heaved and her eyes were wide with terror.

She flung her thick woolen cloak on the ground. "Tear it into strips," she ordered, "but be fast, be fast." He grabbed the heavy material with superhuman strength and tore it like tissue paper.

"It is death for you to be in the woods," he cried accusingly.

"And it is death for you too to be in the woods." She hissed at him. "Don't talk, be fast, be fast."

She unfastened the reins of the dead horse and the cinch of the saddle and tied them across the path. They knotted the strips of her robe end to end and swiftly twisted them into a heavy rope. They doubled it and twisted it again and

tied it across the path. Bebesh quickly piled brush over the obstacles. "Necessary to hide them," she said. All at once she raised her hand. "Listen," she whispered, "they come." The drumming of hoof beats sounded loudly above them and Bebesh fled into the woods. Jonathan turned and nocked an arrow. He tucked the remaining two under his left forefinger. Here they come.

Three horsemen were silhouetted against the sky for a moment and then came sliding down the incline. Jonathan shot at the rider on the right—missed. His second arrow hit the middle rider in the throat—almost missed him, too. His third arrow hit the horseman on the left squarely in the chest. The rider he had missed had his sword out now, sliding right down on top of him. Jonathan hurled his useless bow at the grinning face and saw it whistle over the peaked felt hat. He was stooping to pick up a rock when the sliding horse hit the concealed trip ropes. They caught the horse's legs and threw both rider and horse into a violent front somersault. Jonathan sprang for the loose bridle. Above him now he could hear the thunder of many horses. In an instant he was mounted and galloping through the forest along the line of crimson flags. He glanced back. A lone pursuer was sliding down into the trap, a tower of steel mesh with a gleam of brass at his left shoulder—Tunch Belek.

Jonathan was terrified at the exhausted condition of his horse. Must be carefully rationed to finish at all. His sword lay broken at the foot of the hill and his bow was gone. He heard the crash of metal as Tunch Belek's horse hit the barrier. Hope he broke his neck.

The crimson flags guided him in a great circle back toward the hill on the edge of the black sand, another crash back at the barrier, and another, and another. As his exhausted

horse labored up the hill he thought he heard a smashing sound in the woods back of him. Sounded like a horse galloping. He topped the hill and cantered painfully out on the black sand. The khan was there on his horse about twenty yards to the right, and there was Bebesh waving delightedly. She didn't know his horse was about to drop. The finish line at the khan's tent was still a full mile away. Jonathan waved at the khan and Bebesh and prayed, for what he was not sure—just for life. The crashing behind him in the woods was unmistakable now. He looked down at the white lather on his horse's neck. More speed was impossible. He had to fight down an overwhelming surge of panic—absolutely weaponless.

"I want my life," he cried, "I want to win." His mind started appraising everything on himself and the horse as a possible weapon. He remembered the towel snapping contests in the gym at school. Wonder if he could keep a horse away by snapping his red shirt in its face. He pulled it off and laid it before him on the pommel. Perhaps his empty scabbard could ward off a sword cut or two. He unfastened it and twisted it through his silk sash.

He had three-quarters of a mile to go when General Tunch Belek shot over the crest behind him. His terrible hammer was in his hand now and he was leaning far forward in the saddle. He was on a different horse, a vigorous bay, his third—must have waited at the bottom of the hill by the trip ropes and gotten another, appeared to be fresh and full of energy.

The reality of death finally galloping down on him, a horrible smashing death, drove Jonathan's brain into a mad frenzy of ideas. He started unwinding the green silk sash around his waist. It was tough and heavy and over twenty

feet long. He unhooked one of the massive bronze stirrups and knotted it firmly to one end of the sash. He tied the second stirrup to the other end. Tunch Belek was only a short distance away, overtaking him swiftly, when Jonathan started whirling one of the stirrups around his head. After a few revolutions his exhausted horse stopped shying, even too tired to shy. As the stirrup revolved faster and faster he paid out more and more silk sash until its whole length was whirling around his head in a whistling power-packed forty-foot circle, like an Argentine bola.

Jonathan heard Tunch Belek's deep excited laughter behind him. He glanced back. He was only fifty feet behind now—gaining fast. The morning sun was flashing from the links of his armor and the brass hammer was whirling now, making a ring of gold around his head—the irresistible force that smashed through bones and flesh and nerves. Jonathan gripped the pommel of his saddle with his left hand—like killing a cat with a baseball bat.

Tunch Belek was only ten yards behind when Jonathan let his stirrup go. The general dodged ponderously but the whirling circle, packed now with thousands of foot-pounds of kinetic energy, hit the big bay horse just where his neck joined his head. The flying bronze stirrups on each end of the sash whirled in and wrapped both horse and rider into an immovable package. A terrible ringing cry came from the falling giant and the loudness of the crash surprised even Jonathan—sounded like a derrick dropping a load of scrap iron.

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The three of them were sitting under the canopy of the khan's tent. The gray wolf flag was hanging from a lance thrust into the sand before them. Jonathan was tinkering with the tiny transmitter. Something was wrong with the message scrambler.

Bebesh was looking at him; so was the khan. "The people almost worship you, my son," he said. Jonathan realized the old man was using a form of the word which meant "son and heir." "Because of the brave tricks you played in the Game of Ott, things no one had ever done in our history," he smiled, "our scribes are now engrossing them in the perpetual records: your cutting of the tether rope, the whistling arrows, the sand in the wrestler's eyes, the terrible whirling weapon that killed General Tunch Belek." His fierce eyes twinkled. "The rope trap at the bottom of the cliff," he asked innocently, "out of what American magic did you make that?" Bebesh was gazing down at the design of the Kazak rug.

"That was a Buranulke trick," Jonathan said, "taught to me here in your country, where loyalty and friendship are so highly valued."

“Game Two calling Game One.”

Jonathan snatched up the microphone. “Game One reporting success of Operation ‘World Series’ to Game Two.” He knew the importance of completing his message before their position was triangulated. “Parachute the atomic howitzer in and we can destroy the Trans-Baikal Railway any time they start a war.”

The other voice came in faintly. “Congratulations! How can we rely on the loyalty of Buranulke?”

Jonathan looked down at the damascened crest on the jeweled scabbard hanging from his sash, the old khan’s most recent gift to him. It was beautifully executed: a wolf cub looking up at its father. He pressed the button on the mike. “Because the next khan will be an officer of U.S. Central Intelligence,” he said.

“We will parachute some troops in to help you. Tip us off when and where to drop them.” There was a crackle of static and Jonathan waited for it to clear—blasted lightning up in those black mountains.

Jonathan looked at the fine honest face of the ancient khan and then at the beauty of Bebish. He thought of the hundreds of years the freedom-loving little country had bravely held off the rapacious outer world. He knew what would happen if anyone once established a foothold, even his beloved United States. It would be like Commodore Perry opening up Japan and setting the stage for Okinawa. He sat thinking, holding the microphone in his hand.

His formal request, made in that delirious moment when he realized he had won the Game, had been a complex one. He had rehearsed the speech many nights as he lay in his tent, knowing he would not be alive to give it. He had felt the khan’s sword slap down on his back, quite a bang, and

had heard him shout, “Yasha emir.” The old boy had gone all out and so had the crowd, made a real show out of it. Even the shamans with their yellow robes showed some signs of life.

The khan had pointed his hooked sword toward the black precipices above them. “For the second time,” he cried, “the Terrible Game of Ott has been won by a member of the same family, the nephew of the terrible ocean pirate, my cousin and heir,” he pointed his sword at Jonathan, “your next khan.”

The roof had really blown off then—a roar that must have lasted five minutes before it disintegrated into individual shouts and yells. Sounded like a favorite son demonstration at a national convention, hooked sword flashing all over the place and people throwing showers of black sand into the air. Even the shamans finally went all out, flopping around like big yellow butterflies and lighting up their explosive incense bombs that went up with big bangs and clouds of green smoke that smelled like chestnuts. What more perfect proof did the shamans need for their always-quoted theory that destiny was fan-shaped, and that the affairs of men repeated themselves in great revolving circles?

Jonathan was aghast. The people in this country were really nuts. Anything having to do with the Terrible Game was more important than anything else, all tied up with their history and their religion and their feelings about courage and masculinity and independence, part of their souls and hearts even now that he had won. How could he ever do what had to be done?

It wasn't too easy giving a speech when you were completely exhausted, with the rich taste of your own blood in your mouth and your nose bent off to one side and hurting

like the devil. His sash was still wrapped around Tunch Belek. Hard to try to look dignified and give a speech while holding up his pants with his left hand.

“Most honored khan, my father, my cousin and my closest friend. And people of the bravest country in the world, my country. I came to Buranulke voluntarily to take the great personal risk of playing the Terrible Game of Ott because my life means nothing compared to the continued independence of this nation of warriors. We are all happy because of our great victory over the Russians, but our shamans are wise when they tell us that destiny is fan-shaped, and that the affairs of men repeat themselves in great *forward moving* circles.

“The Russian war machine almost conquered your brave nation a few days ago. If the battle had lasted one hour more our fire wall would have burned out, and we would have lost. The science of building terrible new weapons is advancing so swiftly in the outside world that Buranulke cannot possibly remain free much longer. Even now she could be conquered by a full-scale attack by the Red army. You have seen atom bombs but you haven’t yet seen hydrogen bombs. You were fighting fifteen divisions, the Red army can attack you with its full four hundred. The age-old wisdom of the shamans has told them that each great circle of history brings us closer to defeat.” The shamans were looking at him with astonishment. What were they thinking?

Jonathan described the radioactive sand that could be released in a deadly rain from the sky to make whole areas of their country uninhabitable. He described the deadly new science of germ warfare and the race to develop the most deadly intercontinental ballistic missiles.

“My wish,” he said, “is to see Buranulke forever free,

forever the Gibraltar of the continent of Asia. My wish is that you let me, your future khan, provide for this country I have come to love the weapons and defenses that will forever keep our enemies, the Russians, at bay: ground to air missiles, that will intercept enemy missiles when they are still a hundred miles away; the latest in radar detection devices; ground to ground missiles; defenses against germ warfare, poison gas and radioactive sand.

“I want you to be free from all outside rule, even the United States, but today to be free one must be strong. No nation can be strong now without modern offensive and defensive weapons.

“As soon as the Russians realize that General Tunch Belek has been killed, they will start planning an all-out offensive that this little country cannot hope to survive. The U.S. can send in mathematicians and scientists and engineers to train you and show you how to use our new weapons. They will not be men of war, like me, but men of science, artisans not trained for battle. Your Terrible Game would kill them all before the second stage.

“My request is that you accept as a gift from the United States the weapons and technicians to make Buranulke the Gibraltar of Asia, and that they be admitted temporarily to this country, to be under the complete control of our wise men, the shamans, just long enough to train our own soldiers, without being required to play the Terrible Game. Whenever the shamans in their wisdom decided that a scientist had shown us all he could, they could give him his choice: leave or play the Terrible Game. In this emergency we can rely on the vigilance and the intelligence of our shamans to safeguard the brave people of this land.”

Jonathan stopped and looked around. There was a dead

silence. Thousands of eyes staring at him, silent. So he had overplayed his hand. His plan was just too farfetched—let people in without playing the game, sacrilege!

The old khan stared at him. What was he thinking?

“Any request you make, my son, is suitable, except one that adversely affects the security of Buranulke, or the khan’s position. I will think carefully of everything that you have said, and confer with our wise men, the shamans. I will give you my answer tomorrow.”

The next afternoon the khan’s mind was made up. “I will show my deep personal faith in your friendship for me and for Bebesh by granting your wish. It is a security problem. I have vouched for you to my people and to the shamans, given them every assurance that you will not betray me, or this tiny country.”

The khan was looking at Jonathan now as he pushed the little button. “Game One calling Game Two. Hello.” The static had stopped.

The faint “Hello” came back to him, fuzzy, as if shouted from the top of a distant mountain. Jonathan shouted into the tiny transmitter.

“You can rely on this country’s complete loyalty and help. I pledge that, if it remains independent, every inhabitant of the Cyclone Country will defend with his life the ideals of freedom our nations hold in common. It needs defensive weapons and instructors and scientific education.” His voice became grim. “But don’t send in soldiers expecting to take over,” he warned, “unless they are extremely good at the Game of Ott—even better than I am.”

Within a week the weapons started to arrive. Jonathan watched them as they floated down at night under huge parachutes from the stratosphere: ground to air missiles,

canisters of rocket fuel, atomic howitzers, anti-aircraft and radar installations, tools, instruction books—would they never stop?

Jonathan stared at the stenciled identification on one of the huge crates, and a wave of apprehension fled across his back. PROJECT ARMAGEDDON. From the Bible, Armageddon, the mighty battle of the nations that was to be fought before the last judgment. Jonathan looked up at the black basalt peaks. What more likely place for Armageddon than this most exposed outpost of America, five hundred miles inside Soviet Russia?

Then the technicians arrived with their slide rules and books and adding machines.

A month after that Jonathan and the khan could sit in the shade under the canopy and see scores of thin needle-nosed rockets with delicate swept-back fins standing on tiptoe peeking out of the woods—waiting. Teachers who had once been part of the Military Aid Mission to Turkey, and could speak Turkish, were teaching English and mathematics and ballistics and rocketry to enthusiastic classes of students with peaked felt hats. From where he sat Jonathan could see the radar beacons revolving suspiciously on every mountain top, searching thousands of square miles for any hint of danger, holding off Armageddon.

The American technicians graciously paid tribute to Buranulke's age-old traditions and prides. They bowed their heads respectfully in the oriental manner when the ancient khan rode up on his Prejvalsky's horse to inspect the installations. The engineers eagerly listened to his words and often abandoned the supersonic intricacies of rocketry to apply their mathematical formulas to the building of larger trebuchets and mightier and more accurate catapults. They

respected the old warrior's reluctance to abandon the powerful, well tested medieval defenses until the new weapons had proved themselves in actual battle. They respectfully worked out more efficient ways for casting the great bronze bombards and for increasing the power of the serpentine that propelled the giant stone balls. They took daily lessons in Turkish and dug water and oil wells and laid plastic pipelines with trenching machines and chlorinated the water and set up the world's only modern hospital located in a great tent made of black felt.

And as from time immemorial, the warlike, superstitious people of Buranulke believed, ever more fanatically, that the Cyclone Country's defense was not in the slender shining rockets or in the radar beacons or the Geiger counters, but in the ancient ritual of their Terrible Game. Each technician after he had completed his task was courteously given his choice: leave on the next rocket or play the Terrible Game, and either die or attempt to become a worshipped hero of Buranulke. Regretfully they all chose to leave.

Jonathan realized that, once the defenses were completed, this deeply ingrained ritual of the Terrible Game, which he had utilized to penetrate the Cyclone Country, would be the only loophole through which an effective attack could still be made by Russia.

Information had already come in through his father's intelligence sources that the greatest athletes in European and Asiatic Russia were being scientifically trained in the various events of the Terrible Game, and that repeated attempts would be made to win it until Soviet Russia could get her foothold in the Cyclone Country.

One day the khan and Bebesh were watching Jonathan as he supervised the opening of a carton from the United States.

It was addressed to him personally. In it was a knee-length coat of armor made of flexible overlapping metal plates. It was cunningly constructed of an alloy so light it weighed no more than a spring overcoat.

Jonathan pulled it over his head. Delineated on the plates of the chest was the black figure of a warrior ant, pincers open. Bebesh cried out in astonishment. The movements his body transmitted to the intricately joined plates caused the ant to move in a startlingly lifelike manner.

There was a letter in the bottom of the carton, his father's handwriting.

Dear Jonathan:

This is the strongest and lightest protection the Defense Department can dream up. We have a crash operation "Project Status Quo" working on your helmet, sword and a special laminated bow. They will be ready in a few weeks. We can't afford to take any chance of losing our astonishing advantage. Our control of the Trans-Baikal Railway is most important, but the fact that we have an advance radar station right inside Russia itself puts them in a desperate military position. We must hold it at all costs. I want to tell you again how deeply proud I am of what you have done, Jonathan. Your bravery and steadiness under the pressure of impossible conditions does not match our family tradition—it goes far beyond it.

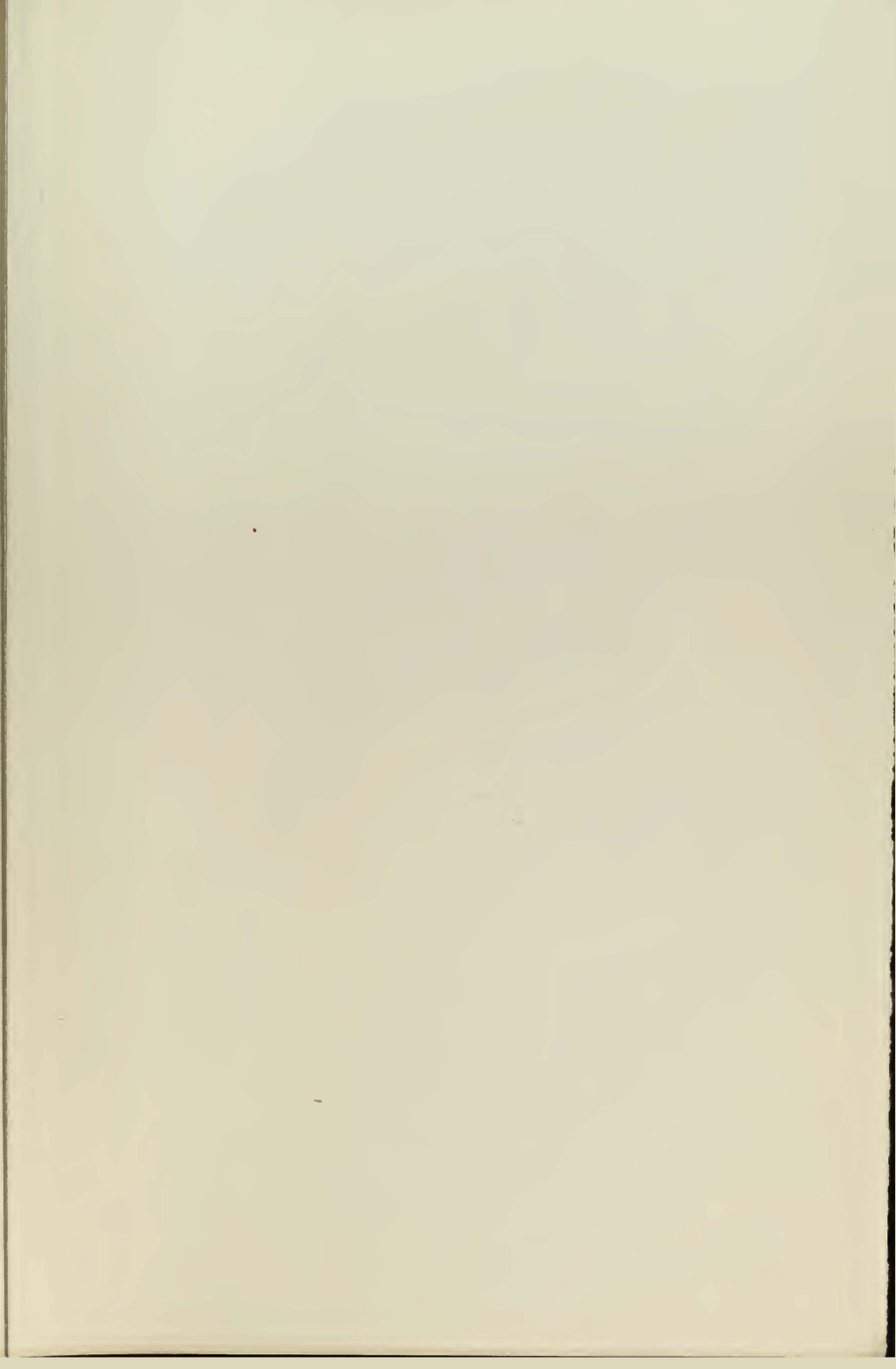
Affectionately,
The Old Ant

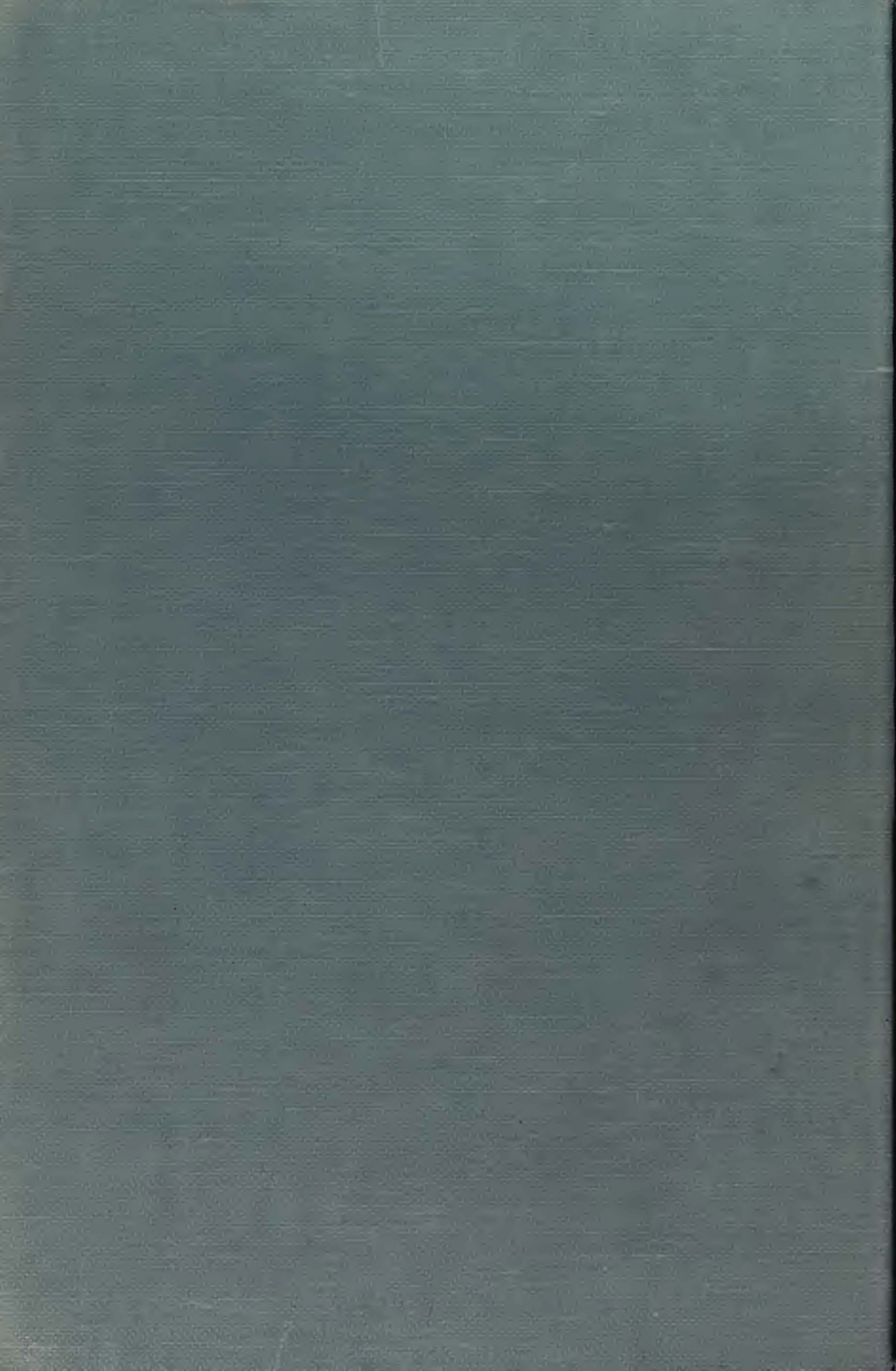
Jonathan stared at the letter and all at once a lightning flash of intuition showed him the future. He closed his eyes and listened: the hiss of razor-sharp arrows on the black sand plain, the galloping of mailed figures, fighting and dying through the ancient ritual of the "Terrible Game." Buranulke would be forever safe from direct invasion, American tech-

nology would see to that, but they would be forever vulnerable at the medieval level. At any time a man in armor could ride into the country and, if he was skillful enough, win the game and take the country over for the Russians.

Jonathan opened his eyes and looked up at the towering black mountains. A faint rumble of thunder came to his ears. He would have to stay in Buranulke a while to see how things developed. He looked up and saw the ancient khan staring at him, reading his thoughts.

“I am getting very old, my son. Last night the shamans were making their incantations. I gazed into a green incense cloud and saw my gray wolf banner flapping in the wind. Before my eyes the wolf became dim and vanished, and waving on the banner was a huge black ant. My son, you can never leave.”





"THE GREATEST SPY OPERATION IN HISTORY!"

That's what the President called it. Jonathan had heard him, yet it was almost impossible to believe that he, nineteen years old and just home from college, was to be part of it.

What he didn't know was that he would be all of it.

Suddenly Jonathan found himself thrust into strange intensive training in archery, horsemanship, judo, Asiatic wrestling and deadly swordsmanship—training that would prepare him for a grisly game on a bizarre mission in a barbaric land—a mission on which depended not only his life... but the future of the entire Free World.

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